Home by BCI603

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Summary:

El is home, surrounded by all the people she loves, who love her. She gets to experience new things, with new friends, and as summer approaches, things are looking up, but nothing ever lasts forever, and promises are meant to be broken.

1. Chapter 1

Tuesday, November 6, 1984
1 AM

"Mike, calm down already." Dustin said, groaning as the thirteen year old continued pacing in front of everyone. Mike glared at him and he shut up.

"She's strong, she'll be alright." Joyce said, standing up and stopping him, putting her hands on his shoulders. He bit his lip and looked at her.

"I can't lose her again." he said softly.

"I know," she nodded, "and you won't, Sweetie. I'm sure they'll be back soon."

"It's been an hour since we got back." he said, biting at his thumb nail.

"Hey, they're fine, Mike, okay? He's kept her safe for a year and he'll keep her safe for as long as possible. You know that." Jonathan said. Mike nodded, practically falling onto the couch.

Almost immediately after, headlights shown through the window and before Mike could get up, Nancy said,

"It's mom."

"Mom?" he asked, confused. She nodded. Not even two seconds later Karen started banging on the door and Nancy opened it, immediately tackled into a hug.

"Christ, mom, I'm fine, calm down."

"Where's your brother?" she asked, pulling away and looking at her daughter, making sure she wasn't hurt. Someone must have called her. Nancy nodded in the direction of Mike and Karen pulled him up quickly, hugging him tight. "I haven't heard from you two *at all* and I get a phone call saying that you've had a few rough and crazy days?

What the *hell* is going on?"

"Who called you?" Mike asked, face squished into her shoulder.

"Michael Aaron Wheeler! That is *not* the point!" she scolded.

"His middle name is Aaron?" Dustin whispered to Lucas, who shrugged.

"Now is not the time to be a smartass." Karen told him. Mike rolled his eyes and wiggled out of her hold, crossing his arms over his chest. "Don't roll your eyes at me!"

"Mom, he's had a rough night- we all have. Cut him some slack."

"I wish I knew what you were talking about, but I don't, do IT?"

"Oh my *God,* mom, just stay out of it!" he exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. "I can't deal with this right now." he walked out the door and slammed it on his way out. Karen sighed angrily and turned to Nancy.

"Where have you been the last couple days? Neither of you have even gone to school!"

"Don't start with me too, mom, we have a good reason."

"Well?"

"Karen, calm down." Joyce said, "We'll explain everything once Jim gets back."

"Are you in some sort of trouble, Nancy?" Nancy rolled her eyes and followed her brother out the door. Karen sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, and then looked at the kids, who were slightly wide eyed and looking at her. She then noticed Will lying on the couch with his head in Jonathan's lap- so pale he nearly matched the white in the hospital gown he was wearing. Next she saw a beaten up Steve Harrington and then the drawings all over the place. She gaped and looked at Joyce, who nodded.

"We've had a mess the last couple of days. I'm going to need to talk

to Jim before we talk to you. There is a lot you don't know."

Before Karen had a chance to respond, headlights shown through the windows- broken windows, and she heard her son yell out the letter *L* . Everyone else rushed out the door so she followed, only to see her son hugging a shorter figure as if his life depended on it.

"I was so worried." Mike whispered to her.

"I'm sorry. Back now, like I promised." he chuckled wetly.

"Hey love birds! We're her friends too!" El giggled tiredly and she and Mike let go of each other and El went to hug them all. Mike stood with his back facing everyone for a couple of seconds, trying to discreetly wipe his eyes, having gotten emotional hugging her.

"You alright kid?" Hopper asked, putting a hand on his shoulder. He sniffed and nodded, looking up at him.

"I'm fine." he said. "Just relieved she's okay," he bit his lip and looked at the ground. "I'm sorry."

"For?"

"For the way I acted earlier."

"It's okay, kid. Everyone breaks down every once in awhile. I think you needed it." Mike nodded in agreement. He turned around and walked to the group along with Hopper.

"Hopper." Joyce said, motioning for him to follow her. He raised an eyebrow but did so. They stood on the porch while everyone hugged El and talked to her. Karen sort of stood on the sidelines, unsure of what to do.

"What's wrong?" Hopper asked.

"We have to tell Karen." he furrowed his brows. "And I mean everything. Steve called her and told her that Mike and Nancy had a rough couple of days and she came over immediately, thinking they were hurt and asking questions." Hopper sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You do know that she and *Ted* are convinced that El is a Russian Spy?” he asked, “And that they know Mike kept her in their basement for a week?”

“Yes I’m aware of that, Hopper, but dammit, we need more than two adults to know about her.”

“But you don’t know what they would do. They could end up getting her killed!”

“Hopper, you and I both know that Ted Wheeler isn’t good for shit, he would make a call to someone and wouldn’t worry about it again. As for Karen, I know she gossips about *everything* but if she knows everything thats happened, that her *children* are involved, she won’t tell a soul.” Hopper sighed, pausing for a few seconds.

“Fine, fine. We’ll tell her. Let’s not go *too* into detail, though.” she nodded in agreement and he turned to the group. “Everyone, get inside and Nancy, help clean El up some, would you? Joyce and I need to talk to Karen.” Nancy nodded and the group made their way inside, El under Mike’s arm as she wrapped her arms around him. Once the door was shut and a cigarette was lit, Karen said,

“Well?” Hopper rubbed a hand over his face and blew out the smoke.

“It all started the night Will went missing..."

"Nancy!" They heard El call from the bathroom a while later. Nancy had got a shower started for her and the younger girl had finally finished washing all the gel out of her hair and getting rid of the dirt and grime all over her.

"Duty calls!" Nancy joked as she got up, and got few laughs as she left to go help El. She had the clothes on and was using the towel to squeeze the water out of her hair.

"You ready to dry your hair?" Nancy asked. She nodded. "Do you know what a hair dryer is?"

"Yes." she nodded again. “Hop has one, but it doesn’t work.”

"Okay good. I’ll have to get you one that works." El smiled at her. By

the time Nancy finished drying her hair, she had El giggling. When they were done, Eleven's hair was hanging right above her eyes, and looked like Mike's when he blow dried his.

Nancy cleaned up the small mess of water on the floor and El timidly walked back into the living room, smiling when she spotted Mike on the couch beside Will, who was now sitting up. She joined them, curling up beside Mike, and gave Will a small smile.

"Hi, El." he said, grinning at Mike and then her. She assumed Mike made a face because Will chuckled, coughing a little.

"Hi." she whispered. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too, finally."

"Oh yeah!" Dustin exclaimed. "This is the first time you two have actually talked."

"This is the first time they've *seen* each other." Lucas said, smacking him.

"I saw him while he was sleeping." El said. "But… that doesn't count. He didn't see me." She tilted her head, looking at Mike. "Did I say that right?" He nodded with a wide grin.

"Hopper's been teaching you, I assume?" Jonathan asked. She nodded.

"I can read and write some." She said with a shrug. Mike bit his lip, hardly able to keep the grin off his face.

"Mike?" she asked.

"Hm?" he looked down at her

"You didn't break your promise." she said. He raised an eyebrow in confusion. She smiled and said softly, "You promised me a home." He then remembered, and smiled.

"I did, didn't I?" she nodded.

"I'm home."

“So… you’re telling me that this… this *man* has been keeping children with *abilities* locked up and doing experiments on them?” Karen asked carefully. Hopper and Joyce nodded. “He forced them to kill people, and animals?”

“From what little El has told me, yes.” Hopper nodded.

“That’s horrible and sounds like a plot to a movie or TV show.” she said, running a hand over her face.

“Karen, I can assure you, this is not a plot to a movie or TV show.” Joyce said. “Trust me, I understand that this seems unreal and insane, but it is. For God's sake, the man had an exact replica of my sons body made and we had a funeral for him because everyone thought he was dead, when in reality, he was in another dimension.”

“Doesn’t the fact that they were trying to hide it from you sound weird?” Hopper asked.

“All of it sounds weird.” Hopper snorted.

“We can prove it to you, when El is strong enough again. She might seem like she’s fine in there, but I can promise you she’s exhausted. She’s fascinated with that boy of yours, and she hasn’t seen him in nearly a year.” he nodded his head back towards the door- clearly talking about Mike.

“He was the first person to show her kindness, of course she is.” Hopper shook his head.

“Nah, she really likes him, Karen. It’s… it’s annoying, to say the least. All she would do is talk to me about him, tell me everything he told her that week. She never forgot it.” he took a puff of a new cigarette, passing it to Joyce. “She was able to see him, told me he cried the first hundred days he called her. Of course, he was still upset, but she said he seemed angry.”

“She’s why he’s been acting out.” Karen realized. “Because he missed her.” Hopper nodded. “Ted surely isn’t helping the situation, either.

It’s late, I need to get them home.” Hopper snorted.

“Good luck dragging Mike away from her.” Karen rolled her eyes.

"Michael, we need to-" Karen started to say, but stopped as soon as she saw that her son was asleep, both arms wrapped around El. She let out a quiet sigh but smiled a little at the sight.

"Go on home, Karen, he'll be fine here. We'll bring him home tomorrow." Joyce said. Karen nodded.

"Nancy, are you coming?" she turned to her daughter, who nodded.

"Uh, yeah, I really need a shower." she said. She kissed Jonathan on the cheek and left with her mom.

"Are you guys staying here too?" Steve asked Dustin, Lucas, and Max

“I mean, I can’t exactly go home while Billy is here passed out on the kitchen floor.” They had moved him out of the way a while ago.

“I don’t have a key to my house. Gotta wait for mom to get up. It’s useless.” Dustin shrugged. Steve rolled his eyes.

“Of course you don’t. Sinclair, what about you?”

“I’m staying.” Steven nodded.

"Okay, well, just give me a call tomorrow if you need a ride home." he left too. Those who were awake looked at each other, Dustin and Lucas beginning to giggle at their friends, all cuddled up together on the couch.

"Oh grow up." Max glared at them. They stopped and looked at her. "According to you two and Will, he has been depressed and heartbroken since she left, give him a break."

"I'd have to agree with her, boys. Let him be happy- let them both be happy. When you fall in love with a girl who loves you the way they love each other, you'll understand." Joyce said. Hopper let out a cough from the other side of the room. "Oh shut it, Hop, you know they're in love." he started grumbling as he stood and went to the

kitchen to get a drink. He opened the fridge and the Demogorgon that Steve and Dustin had stored in there fell out.

"What the hell?" He yelled waking both Mike and El up. El glared at Hopper through the wall.

"What?" Dustin asked, and then saw the Demogoron on the floor. "Oh, about that, uh..." Hopper just ignored him and took the slimy, disgusting thing out to get rid of it. Dustin pouted.

"Dude, what would you have done with it anyway?" Mike asked tiredly.

"I don't know, I could have handed it over for scientific research or somet-" A pillow smacked him in the face and he saw Mike glaring at him and El looked sad. "Oh, shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"I know. It's okay." El said. She yawned and stretched, bumping Mike in the forehead on accident. "Oh, sorry Mike." he chuckled.

"It's okay, El. Wanna lay down?" she nodded and he put an arm around her and she put one over his stomach, putting her head on his shoulder.

"You need to eat more. Too skinny." she mumbled, but everyone heard her. Mike snorted.

"Oh he eats all the time, Sweetie." Joyce said. "All the boys do. They're growing boys."

"Eat more eggos." she said. Everyone laughed at that.

"That's why I'm so fat." Hopper said, joining them on the other side of the couch, giving Mike the *I'm watching you* look. Mike rolled his eyes.

"You're not fat, Jim." Joyce said, rolling her eyes. He scoffed and looked over and saw the two kids already asleep, and then heard a loud snore and saw Dustin, Lucas and Max passed out on the floor. Jonathan had long since retired to his room, and Will was in his bed asleep.

"Looks like it's just us." Joyce said. He nodded and rubbed at his eyes. "Do you think we have to worry about the lab anymore?"

"God, I hope not. I made sure to put an idea in Owens head before we went and closed the gate." Joyce raised an eyebrow and he explained.

"Oh, I certainly hope so. She deserves it." Hopper looked at El, who was like a daughter to him, and nodded.

"She really does."

The next morning, Mike woke up, unable to move. He looked down and saw El, and then smiled. He reached up and pushed some hair out of her eyes. He looked around and saw Dustin, Max, and Lucas still asleep on the floor, Joyce and Hopper were in the kitchen, and Will was sitting in a chair watching TV.

"Hey." Mike said quietly, trying not to wake her up. Will looked at him and grinned.

"Hey."

"You feeling better?" Mike asked.

"I haven't felt this good in a long time. What about you?" Mike glanced down at El and nodded.

"So much better it's crazy." Will grinned at him again.

"I'll be even better when I get food in my belly." Will joked. Dustin sat straight up at the word *food* which woke the other two up.

"Food? What are we eating."

"Well, apparently Hopper went to the store and got some eggos and some other things." El's head popped up sleepily when eggos was said, much like Dustin had done.

"Eggos?" Mike laughed as she sat up. She scooted away from him so he could sit up too and then scooted right back so she was close to him.

"When all the other food is done we'll make you kids some eggos!" Hopper called.

"You guys need to call your parents and make sure they know you're okay and that you'll be home later." Joyce called. They all groaned and did so. "Food is ready!" Joyce yelled and they rushed into the kitchen. When their food was put in front of them, they all began to stuff their faces.

"Hungry, huh?"

"We only ate breakfast yesterday." Mike said, and the others nodded in agreement.

"I haven't ate in three days." El said with a mouth full of food. Everyone looked at her.

"Why?" Joyce said. She shrugged innocently.

"You still need to tell me where you've been for the last couple of days, young lady." Hopper said, pointing a fork at her. She swallowed her food and took a sip of orange juice.

"Went to see mama." she said. "And sister."

"Sister?" Everyone chorused.

"Sister." she nodded. "Eight." she added.

"As in...?" Joyce asked.

"Experiment number eight." she told them. "With me when I was younger. She escaped."

"Where is she now?" Lucas asked. She shrugged.

"They were getting revenge on people that hurt them. Tried to get me to find them. I found one, but I didn't kill him. I was supposed to, but he had kids." She shoved a forkful of eggos into her mouth and paused for a few seconds. "I told her I had friends that I had to go back to and help. She wanted me to stay but I couldn't. I had to come back. Nice lady on bus talked to me though." she smiled at that.

Everyone didn't know what to say.

"She had others with her?" Hopper asked. She nodded.

"Police were shooting at us." she pushed her empty plate back and looked at them.

"Wow." Dustin said in awe.

"What kind of abilities does she have?" Will asked.

"She can make you see stuff that isn’t... real. She showed me a butterfly. It was pretty. And..." she stopped talking then, kind of dazed, her eyes beginning to water.

"El?" Mike asked softly. She looked at him and blinked.

"She showed me papa." she whispered. Everyone looked at each other.

"He's gone now, El. He can't hurt you anymore." Mike said. She looked at him.

"Promise?" she smiled. He smiled back and grabbed her hand.

"Promise."

2. Chapter 2

Tuesday, December 11, 1984

After school, Mike and El sat in the basement in El's fort while Mike read to her. The two were waiting on Lucas, Dustin and Will to come over. When he finished the chapter he folded the corner of the page and put the book down so she looked at him, head tilted in confusion.

"So, uh, do you remember last year when I asked you to the snowball?" he asked, fidgeting with the cover of the book.

"Yes."

"There's gonna be another one on Saturday if… if you maybe want to go?" he asked nervously. She gasped quietly in excitement and nodded.

"Yes! I have to ask Hopper though. Hopefully I can." she said. He nodded, smiling at her softly. They sat quietly for a few minutes, Mike playing with her hair. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Oh, uh, braiding your hair." he said.

"Braiding?" he nodded.

"Yeah, it's like… you take three pieces of hair and twist them together- when Holly gets up from her nap I'll see if she'll let me braid her hair so I can show you. And when you're hair gets longer, it'll be easier to braid. I can really only just do small pieces right now."

"Never cutting my hair again." she said, shaking her head, her soft brown curls flying all over the place. He chuckled.

"Well, you might want to get it trimmed every once in awhile. That's what I do because I have a lot of hair and it gets long quick." he told her. She looked at him in confusion. "Trimming is when you cut just a little bit off. They won't be cutting it all off."

"Oh."

"My mom says it helps it grow back faster too." her eyes widened, a smile forming and he laughed.

"Mike! El!" Karen called. The two scrambled up awkwardly and made their way up the stairs.

"Yeah?" Mike asked, reaching the top. Lucas, Dustin, and Will were there, along with Joyce and Hopper.

"What's with the hair?" Hopper asked, an eyebrow raised. All she said was,

"Mike." she grinned at him and with a blush, he grinned back at her.

"Figures. Let's take a seat in the living room and talk." he said. He, Joyce and the kids all sat in the living room and Karen stayed in the kitchen with Holly

"Are we in trouble?" Dustin asked.

"No, no one's in trouble. Dr. Owens gave me something today." he said, trying not to smile. He looked at Joyce who grinned, resting her chin on her hand. He took something out of his pocket and unfolded it. "This is a birth certificate. For Jane Eleanor Hopper." Everyone's jaws dropped and looked at each other. El grinned in excitement. "Remember when I asked you when you wanted your birthday to be?" he asked and she nodded. "Well, according to this, you were born on November 7th, 1971. You're thirteen years old." she got up and rushed to hug him. He smiled and hugged her back. Everyone hugged her too and Mike kissed her on the cheek before she sat back down.

"Dr. Owens did tell me that we should wait another year before you start really going out and doing stuff." That wiped the smile off her face, along with the other teens. "But, since I don't want to keep you hidden and stuck in a house for another year, I'm not taking his advice. Now, I'm not saying you can walk around town freely. For the first couple months, the only places you can go are here or Joyce's house." she smiled slightly, biting her lip. She liked the sound of that- of course, she wanted to go out and be normal like everyone else, but

this was better than nothing. "But I have two rules." she frowned again, tired of so many rules. "One, you cannot use your powers under any circumstance. Unless you or any of your friends are in actual, immediate danger, understand?" she nodded. "And two, you need to wear this." he handed her a box with a tiny pink bow on top. She opened it and there was a charm bracelet that had an E, a heart and what looked like a waffle.

"Is that a waffle?" Lucas asked, looking at it.

"That it is." Hopper snorted. "I had Mike help me out with it."

"Yeah, the guy thought I was crazy when I asked if he had a waffle charm." Mike said. "He didn't but he made one for us."

"This is cool." she grinned at him. "Thank you." she looked at Mike and took it out of the box. "Help me?" he nodded and helped her put it on her wrist.

"The bracelet will help cover your tattoo, along with what I gave you a couple weeks ago, so I want you to always wear it, okay?" Hopper said. She nodded, smiling.

"I love it."

Friday, December 14, 1984

Mike was relieved when he finally got home after school, Troy wouldn't stop bothering him during his last class and he was pissed at the world. Though, at this point, he was *always* pissed at the world.

"I couldn't even finish my work so I'm the only one in class that has homework." he grumbled to Nancy, who was helping him and the others with their homework.

"He's just a giant dick, dude, ignore him." Dustin said.

"Dustin!" Nancy threw a balled up piece of paper at him. He grinned.

"Sorry Nancy."

"Idiot." she mumbled. The phone rang and Nancy got up to get it. "Mike! It's El!" She called. He perked up and went to the phone.

"Hey El!" he said excitedly, just the thought of her cheered him up.

"Hi Mike, guess what?"

"What?"

"Hopper finally said that I can go to the snowball with you."

"Really? That's awesome!"

"Yes. I have to go, Hopper is teaching me math. I wanted to tell you."

"Okay, well, if you need any extra help with it I can try and help. I'm okay at math."

"Okay! Bye Mike!"

"Bye!" The two hung up and Mike went back to the kitchen, noticeably happier.

"What was that about?" Will asked.

"Hopper is letting her go to the snowball tomorrow night."

"Ooh, are you going as dates?" Dustin asked, fluttering his eyelashes. Mike felt his cheeks heat u.

"Shut up." he ignored the question and went back to his work as Dustin and Lucas giggled. Max and Nancy just looked at each other and rolled their eyes while Will just continued his drawing since he finished his homework already.

"How come Will always has his homework done before us?" Dustin whined, eyeing Will.

"Because Will has has priorities in check, whereas you two like to make fun of my brother and his girlfriend instead of doing yours." she replied. Dustin and Lucas instantly quieted and started working again.

"She's not my girlfriend." Mike grumbled, rolling his eyes.

"Well then what the hell is she, Wheeler?" Max asked. He glared at her and shrugged. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Whatever, Mayfield."

Saturday, December 15, 1984

"Hi Mrs. Byers!" El waved as she saw Joyce walk in, with a dress, shoes, and another bag- she didn't know what was in that.

"Hi Sweetie! Are you excited?" El nodded excitedly.

"Yes!"

"Well, let's get to work, we have to be back in two hours to help Will get ready." El nodded and led Joyce to her room, where she got started on El's hair.

Two hours later

"Hey El, you excited for your little date with Mike?" Jonathan joked when she and Joyce arrived back at the Byers house. El furrowed her brows in confusion.

"Date?" she asked.

"Figures Hop wouldn't tell you about that." Joyce muttered to herself. "A date is basically when two people that like each other go out and have lunch, dinner or, anything really, including dances."

"Me and Mike are going on a date?" she asked. Joyce smiled.

"You sure are." El's smiled widened.

"Mom!" Mike complained, resisting the urge to stomp his foot like a toddler.

"What? You look so handsome! Oh come on, don't look at me like

that, this is your first dance!" Karen exclaimed as she took pictures of him. Nancy walked down the stairs, looking as beautiful as ever. "Oh my goodness, your turn!"

"Mom!" Nancy chuckled as she posed for the pictures.

"You two stand together. I want to take a couple before you two leave." They brother and sister stood next to each other while Karen took pictures of them. "Don't they both look great, Ted?"

"Uh huh." he didn't even look at them. Mike had to literally bite his tongue to keep from getting smart with him.

"Just ignore him, Mike." Nancy said quietly. He just grumbled to himself. They finally left after another million pictures, as Mike put it.

"I don't understand why he's such an ass. He doesn't even care." Mike rambled. As he did so, Nancy listened to him, commenting every once in awhile. Once he finished his rant, she said,

"I know he hasn't been the best dad, Mike, but at least he's around. I know all his old ass does is sleep, eat and start arguments, but we're lucky that we at least have him."

"Yeah, but he's never acted like a dad, to any of us. He's never *tried* to take me to a sports game, and no, it's not because *he knows I wouldn't like it*, or anything like that, and he's never taken you to those father daughter dances that you used to want to go to."

"You're right. Completely right." she said, glancing at him. "I hate that he's never spent time with you like he's supposed to. And honestly, I don't care that we never went to those dances, mom was the main reason I wanted to go and some of my friends told me that they weren't as awesome as mom said. You know how she likes to exaggerate stuff." she nudged him and he smiled a small smile. "But you're his only son, you'd think he'd go out and do stuff. You should get tickets to the next football game and see if he wants to go."

"Gross." he shuddered and she rolled her eyes. "What if he doesn't?" he asked, biting his lip.

"Hell, if the sorry ass doesn't go, ask Hopper. I'm sure he'd love to go to a football game."

"I don't know about that, I think he wanted to kill me when El told him I asked her to the snowball."

"Nah, he likes you. He just wants to scare you a little bit."

"Oh, he's scared me more than a little bit, that's for sure."

When they arrived, Mike immediately went to join Lucas and Max at a table and Nancy went to give Jonathan a quick kiss on the cheek and went to tend to the punch bowl.

"Where's El, Dustin and Will?" Mike asked upon reaching the two.

"Right here!" Dustin almost yelled as he and Will walked up.

"Dude, what the hell happened to you?" Mike asked Dustin.

"What?"

"You look like you have a birds nest on your head." Lucas tried to touch his hair and Dustin slapped his hand away.

"I worked hard on this you assholes!" he grumbled.

"Mom and Hopper are talking to El before she comes in." Will told Mike quietly. Mike nodded. Soon, it was just Mike sitting alone at the table. The others were up dancing, even Dustin and Nancy- he quickly decided not to question it. He was just glad he was enjoying himself. *Every Breath You Take* began playing and the gym door opened, and walked in El. He looked up and saw her, standing up. She looked around until she spotted him and they walked towards each other until the met in the middle.

"Wow, El...you look beautiful." she looked up at him and smiled in thanks. "Do you, um, want to dance?"

"I...don't know how."

"Me neither, wanna figure it out?" she nodded and smiled. He took

her hand and led her on the dance floor, near Dustin and Nancy. "You put your hands, uh, here." he put her hands on his shoulders, "And I put mine here." he put his hands on her waist nervously. She smiled. They started swaying back and dancing, Nancy and Dustin just grinned at each other, shaking their hair around, and Lucas couldn't keep the grin off his face, until Max pulled him in and kissed him. After she pulled away, he was shocked, but then went back to his cheeky grin and she turned pink, resting her forehead on his shoulder. Will was having fun dancing as well, and Mike and El just stared into each other's eyes, smiling. Nancy and Dustin looked over at the two just in time to see Mike kiss her. He pulled away, blushing and she smiled widely and put her forehead against his as they continued dancing. Dustin looked at Nancy, his mouth wide open.

"That was the cutest thing I have ever seen." she said, and then rolled her eyes at Dustin. "Oh come on, you know it was. Be happy for him, Dustin."

"Oh I am, I'm just surprised he had the balls to do it." he said. She rolled her eyes once again.

"I don't think I've ever seen a group of kids curse as much as you guys do. And this is the second time they've kissed, according to Mike."

"Yeah, Mikey boy!" he exclaimed even though Mike couldn't hear him. Nancy just laughed and shook her head at him. "Do you think that… that Mike will be happier now that El is back?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said honestly, "I really hope so." He nodded in agreement. After two more dances, Jonathan cut in and asked to dance with her. Dustin looked sad, but Nancy said,

"Save me another dance or two before the end of the night, okay?" she winked at him and he grinned and nodded. He went back to the table where everyone had also decided to stop dancing.

"I see you had a lot of fun dancing with Mike's sister, huh?" Lucas asked. Dustin grinned and Mike rolled his eyes.

"Did you two have fun?" Dustin asked Mike and El, who both nodded, cheeks turning pink. "I saw you two kiss but I'm not gonna make fun

of you for it, you know I just like teasing you." El stuck her tongue out at him. He cackled.

"I saw Max kiss Lucas." Will said cheekily.

"No way." The two blushed furiously, although they were holding hands under the table, just like Mike and El.

"Attaboy!" Dustin smacked Lucas on the shoulder, causing the others to laugh.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen!" Mr. Clarke said, walking up to the group. They all waved. "Are you guys having fun?" he asked, pulling up a chair to sit with them.

"Yes sir." They chorused.

"Well good! I'm glad! Have we met?" He said to El, who looked at Mike like a deer caught in headlights. No one had asked about her until now.

"This is the chief's adoptive daughter, Jane, but we call her El because her middle name is Eleanor." Dustin said immediately. Hopper had mentioned his adoptive daughter to Flo, who had mentioned it to Powell and Callahan and half the town knew about her at this point. Way sooner than Hopper liked, that's for sure.

"Don't you have a cousin named Eleanor, Mike?"

"Uh, yeah. She went back to Sweden. She was just visiting."

"Oh, that's right! She had blonde hair, didn't she?" Mike nodded. "Ah, okay. Well, it's nice to meet you, El! Are you going to be attending next semester?" she didn't know what that meant but figured it was about school so she said,

"I'm home schooled." That's what Hopper told her to say if someone asked.

"Ah, okay. Well, I better get back to chaperoning." he joked, standing up. "If you ever need help with school, El, just let me know. I'd be glad to help." she smiled at him and nodded and he walked away.

"So, what are we doing after this?" Dustin asked.

"My mom said she's gonna order pizza when we get back and hang out in the basement." Mike said, taking a sip of the punch that Nancy insisted he drink.

"Have you finished the next campaign?" Will asked him.

"Not yet, I just have to do a few more things and it'll be done. By next Saturday for sure."

"You better, 'cause you've been slacking, Wheeler." Lucas said, giving him a knowing look. Mike rolled his eyes.

"Oh shut it, Sinclair."

"I'll see you later this week, okay?" Mike said as he was saying goodbye to El. She nodded and smiled at the picture he handed her. It was one that Jonathan had taken of them together.

"Thank you." she made sure Hopper wasn't looking and quickly pecked Mike on the mouth and hugged him goodbye before he could react. She was in the car by the time he came back to reality. He smiled and waved at her as Hopper drove away. She waved back at him and he then heard,

"How sweet!" he turned around and saw Nancy watching him, the door wide open. He blushed furiously and glared at her. "Oh come on, don't be mad. That was adorable." She grinned at him and nudged him in the side as he trudged passed her, grumbling about how she didn't understand the aspect of privacy. She just laughed as she went upstairs while he went to the basement with the rest of his friends.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hope you guys are enjoying this so far! :D I'm working on PM guys, I promise. It's just taking a lot longer than we all hoped XD

Wednesday, December 19, 1984

When Mike got home after school- thankfully today was the last day before break- he went up to his sisters room and knocked on the door. He heard a faint, "Come in!" and opened the door.

"Hey." he said, standing at the foot of her bed.

"Hey, how was school?" she asked, looking up from her notebook. He shrugged.

"It was okay, I guess. Troy was out sick. " he told her. "I got tickets to the game."

"You did? I didn't think you would, honestly." he rolled his eyes at her. "Ask him when he gets home."

"I am, but he'll either ignore it or come up with some bullshit excuse not to go."

"Well, if he says no, ask Hopper to go." he bit his lip and nodded, standing up to leave the room. "If he does, don't hesitate to call him out on it, Mike." she said. "Tell him like it is." he smiled at her and nodded.

Instead of asking when he got home- Ted was asleep in his Lay-Z-Boy before Mike even had a chance to- he asked during dinner.

"Hey dad, I got tickets to the last football game on Friday. Do you want to go?" he asked hopefully. Ted took a sip of his drink and said,

"You know how busy I am, Michael. I doubt I'll have time to go." Mike scoffed and pushed his half eaten plate away from him, leaning

back in his chair.

"God, you are *so* full of shit, dad. Literally all you're gonna do is-"

"Don't you talk to me like that, I'm your father."

"-sit in your damn chair and sleep! You may be my *father* but you sure are a shitty one. Mom, can I be excused?" Karen sighed and nodded. Mike wanted to say much more, but considering he respected his mom and sisters enough not to, he bit his tongue and went up to his room.

"It's the truth, dad. You want him to be in to sports and shit, but when he asks you to go to a football game with him, you have some stupid excuse? What the hell?" Nancy grumbled, "Can I be excused too, mom?" Karen nodded once again, and joined her, picking up Holly and taking her upstairs, leaving Ted, alone, at the dining room table again.

Nancy knocked on Mike's door, "Hey, can I come in?"

"Whatever," he huffed, and she opened the door to see him sprawled across his bed, face buried in a comic.

"I'm sorry about him." she said, sitting next to him.

"It's not your fault. I honestly don't care anymore. It's obvious he'd rather eat and sleep than hang out with his son. He'll regret it one day."

"Hell yeah he will. He's gonna regret a lot, trust me." she squeezed his shoulder comfortingly. "I'm gonna get ready for bed. If you need me just knock on my door, okay?" he nodded. She ruffled his hair and left the room, shutting the door behind her.

He sighed, closing the comic and tossing it on the floor, pressing his hands into his eyes.

I'll ask Hopper tomorrow. Mike decided. *If he says no too, it won't bother me. I'm not getting my hopes up anymore, screw this bullshit.*

Thursday, December 20, 1984

"I'm gonna ask Hopper later tonight. He wants to show El some Christmas lights." Mike told Nancy as he sat down for breakfast.

"Oh, that's sweet!"

"Yeah, she's never seen them. Or a Christmas tree for that matter. Mrs. Byers has told her all about decorating and stuff and El wants to help her decorate their house."

"Awesome! I've gone through all my old clothes and found some I think she'd like. I'll bring them out to her when Hopper picks you up." he nodded and started eating.

He just kept thinking about how excited El was going to be when she sees the lights. He hung around the basement all day, Lucas coming over for a while and they played Uno and a couple other games.

"Did you ask your dad about the game?" Lucas asked, looking at Mike. As Mike looked at his cards, Lucas looked at him- really looked at him. He had dark circles- well not *dark,* but they were definitely there- under his eyes and he looked exhausted. Mike sniffed slightly, putting his card down.

"Yep. He said no, saying he was busy. You know what he's gonna be doing."

And Lucas did know, he's known Mike since they were six, and Ted was old back then- never did anything. He paid people to cut grass and fix things rather than doing it himself. When he wasn't on business trips, he was home asleep or eating. Nothing has changed over the seven years of knowing the Wheelers.

"I'm sorry, man." Lucas said, putting down his own card. Mike shrugged.

"It's okay, I'm used to it at this point."

"I know." Lucas replied sadly, the *you shouldn't be* left unsaid. "Are

you okay, though?"

"Yeah, why?" Mike asked, confused.

"You just look tired, is all."

"Oh. Yeah, I'm fine." Mike waved him off. "Just hard to sleep sometimes." he said, "Wanna play another game? Uno is getting boring." Just like that, the subject was dropped. Lucas knew better than to push him, though, so he went along with it.

Lucas left a little after six, and Hopper arrived not long after. By the time Mike had his coat and shoes on, Nancy had already taken her clothes out to Hopper and come back in.

"Will you be home by dinner?" Karen asked as Mike walked down the stairs.

"Hopper said he's going to order them pizza." Nancy answered for him.

"Okay, well, I trust that Jim won't keep you out late." Mike nodded, rolling his eyes when Karen looked away. Nancy snorted and started up the stairs.

"Have fun with your girlfriend and her dad tonight, Mikey." she teased.

"She's not my girlfriend!" he exclaimed, glaring at her. She just laughed.

"Well what is she then, Mike?" Karen asked, grinning at him. He huffed.

"I have to go before he gets mad." he said. She chuckled.

"Have fun and tell them I said hello. I love you."

"I will, love you too mom." he ran out to Hoppers blazer.

"Hey kid." he said, giving him a half smile.

"Hey Chief."

"Call me Hop."

"Huh?" Mike raised his eyebrows at him

"You know you heard me." Mike chuckled nervously and nodded.

"Okay, Hop."

"How's your break been so far?" he asked a while later, attempting to talk to the quiet teen. Mike shrugged.

"It's been alright, Lucas came and hang out with me for a couple hours. I uh, actually wanted to ask you something." Hopper raised an eyebrow.

"Is this about El or...?"

"No, no sir. I uh, I got two tickets to the football game tomorrow night yesterday and I um, I wanted to know if you wanted to come?" he asked, looking at him, biting his lip. Hopper looked at him, kind of surprised. He didn't expect the kid to ask him that- or that he'd been interested in *football* of all things.

"Well, I don't have to work tomorrow… Don't take offence to this, but I didn't think you would be into football, kid." Mike sighed.

"I'm not." he replied. "My dad is, though. I got the tickets and asked him to go with me to… you know, *bond* I guess, but he doesn't care to do that."

"He's a dick." Hopper said. "Well, why don't we give the tickets to Powell and Callihan and we can do something you actually like?"

"Like what?" Hopper snorted.

"Kid, I don't know what you like, accept you kids love the arcade. El has mentioned *that* place to me multiple times." Mike laughed at that. "We can go there, teach me how to play some of the new games. We could go bowling if you like that-"

"I've never been." Mike told him. Hopper made a face.

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"You've never been bowling and you're thirteen? What?"

"There was a field trip to the bowling alley when I was in sixth grade but I was sick and couldn't go. I've held a bowling all before- well, I wouldn't say I held it because if was too heavy." Hopper snorted.

"We're going bowling then." he told the teen with a grin. Mike nodded, sitting up a little straighter. Hopper parked the blazer on a path in the woods and got out, motioning for Mike to follow. "It's about a five minute walk to the cabin." Mike nodded and basically jogged to keep up with the larger man. "Watch out for the tripwire." he warned and Mike cursed as he nearly tripped over it. Hopper covered up a laugh with a cough and knocked on the door.

"Hi Mike!" El said excitedly, almost immediately tackling him in a hug when she opened the door. Hopper couldn't help but smile at how excited she was. She was all bundled up in a big coat, a hat that Mike had given her, one of Hoppers overly big scarves and gloves.

"You ready to go kid?" he asked her. She nodded excitedly.

"Oh, wait." she ran to the kitchen and grabbed another pair of gloves, handing them to Hopper. "Forgot these."

"Oh, thank ya, kid. She's gotta keep me straight." Hopper joked with Mike, who grinned back at him. "Alright let's go, by the time we get back to town most of the lights will probably be on." she nodded excitedly. "You alright getting in the back?" he asked Mike, who nodded.

"Yes sir." Hopper went around to his side while Mike awkwardly got in the back, bumping his head on the door frame.

"Ow." he mumbled and El giggled. He smiled at her. She got in and once the teens were settled, Hopper started off. El messed around with the radio until she found a station playing Christmas songs.

"The Christmas tree lighting is Sunday." Mike said. "With the parade thing and all."

"Ooh, can we go?" El asked.

"Maybe, we'll see." she grinned at Mike, knowing that was a yes.

"Look El!" Mike pointed out the window. She looked at where he was pointing and gasped. She stared at the lights in wonder as Hopper slowed his truck down so she could look at them better. There were other people walking around the neighborhood with their kids and showing them the lights.

"You two want to get out and go look?" Hopper asked. El looked at him and nodded excitedly. He found a place to stop and parked, and El immediately got out to let Mike out. He once again bumped his head on the doorway.

"Ow. Again." she giggled even harder this time and Hopper chuckled.

"God, you're getting tall, kid." he said, shutting the door behind him.

"It's a curse, I tell ya." Mike joked, fixing his hat. Hopper chuckled.

"Whoops, hold on." Hopper said and grabbed a camera out of the truck. "Joyce made me promise to take pictures so, say cheese!" he snapped a picture of them before they could even react, which then had them laughing and he took another picture. Hopper gladly took pictures of his adopted daughter and her...boyfriend? He didn't know what was going on there but he decided to ask Mike eventually. Sure, he was pretty protective of her, more so now that she was actually going out-somewhat- around people instead of being stuck inside all the time. He trusted Mike, and could tell he was head over heels for her, and she was too, even though she didn't know it.

"Mike, what is that?" El asked, grabbing Mike's hand and pointing at the top of someone's house, where a lit up Santa Claus and reindeer were.

"That's Santa and his reindeer."

"Like in the movies?" she asked. He nodded, smiling at the face she

made. She pulled him down the sidewalk, pointing at things and asking him what they were even if she kind of knew what they were. "What does a candy cane taste like?" She asked.

"Remember those little red and white candies I give you?" Hopper asked her, walking on the other side of nodded. "That's what they taste like."

"Oh! Can we get some?" she asked. He chuckled and nodded

"Sure thing, kiddo. Hey, you two stand here and I'll take a picture of you." They stood in front of one of the particularly brightly lit up houses, an arm around each other, their noses and cheeks pink with the cold, smiles on both of their faces. He took the picture, and then kind of squatted down to their heights and turned the camera around and took a picture of the three of them. They all laughed and continued walking, El mesmerized by the lights.

"What's up lil Wheel!" Steve called, jogging up to them. Mike gave him a look, much like the one he gave him when he called him Nancy in the back of the car.

"Lil Wheel?" El asked, confused.

"It rhymes." Steve shrugged. She shrugged too, still confused. "You guys having fun looking at the lights?" He asked, walking alongside them.

"Yes!" El immediately answered. He chuckled.

"She's never seen Christmas lights before." Mike told him.

"Oh really? You guys should check out my house, my parents go all out for Christmas- even though they're gone most of the month. It's a couple houses down." Mike bit his lip at that, he was well aware of how Steve was alone in the house most of the time.

"You up to it, Hop?" Mike asked. Hopper looked at him, an eyebrow raised. "I just mean..." he started rambling again.

"You know you ramble a lot?" Hopper asked. Mike blushed and nodded. He chuckled. "Yeah, I'm up to it. I need a good workout

anyway."

"Awesome." Steve said, grinning. They still walked slowly, so El could look at every detail she possibly could. When they reached Steve's house, she was amazed. She couldn't even speak.

"Damn." Hopper said as Mike said,

"Wow. How the hell?"

"Like I said, they go all out. It's a pain in the ass putting it up and then taking it down a month later." he said. Just about every inch of the house was covered in lights, and there were little Santa Claus's, reindeer, candy canes, anything you could think of, spread out all over the yard.

"This is..." she thought of the right word.

"Amazing?" Mike asked, and she nodded, wrapping her arms around him and putting her head on his shoulder. He hesitantly put his arms around her too, almost afraid to in front of Hopper, and rested his cheek on top of her head. Hopper took a picture of it. He was definitely gonna be the dad that documents every single thing possible. After looking at a couple more houses, Steve said his goodbyes and went home Hopper, Mike, and El made their way back to Hopper's truck.

The trio went to a couple other neighborhoods and then got pizza, taking it back to the cabin to eat it, and Hopper made them hot chocolate. It wasn't a very good combo, but the two didn't argue. Mike almost immediately began to stuff his face, which made Hopper laugh.

"Hungry?" Mike nodded and continued eating. He barely stopped to drink any of his drink. "Slow down there, kid, don't want you choking on anything." he chuckled. Mike blushed and swallowed his food, drinking some of his drink.

"Uh, ha, sorry. I don't know why I'm so hungry."

"You'll probably have another growth spurt soon or something." Hopper said. El put her pizza down and looked at him confused.

"What is growth spurt?" Mike snorted quietly but she ignored it.

"It's when someone grows a lot over a short period of time." Mike explained to her.

"Oh. Is that why you're tall and skinny?" This time, Hopper snorted, loudly. Mike blushed and nodded.

"Uh, yeah." he mumbled and continued eating while she giggled.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

> Sorry for taking so long to update, guys! This probably isn't the best but I hope you guys enjoy it!

Friday, December 21, 1984

"Does El know what singing is?" Lucas asked Mike as they rode their bikes over to Dustin’s.

"I'd assume so." he said, giving him a weird look. "I mean, she's not stupid, Lucas."

"No, I know. I didn't mean it like that-"

"I know dude, chill." Mike rolled his eyes. "I'm sure Hop's let her listen to his old records or whatever."

"Do you think she'd be game to sing with us at your mom's Christmas Eve party?" Dustin asked the second the two walked in the door.

"Uh, I don't know but I can ask. I doubt she'd even know any of the songs."

"True. Well, if you see her later just ask her." Lucas said. Mike nodded.

"I honestly wish my mom would stop making us sing every year." Mike said.

"Oh come on, you know you love it." Dustin said, nudging him. "When we were younger you used to love it."

"You act like we're in our thirties or something."

"You sure act like it sometimes with your moody ass." Max said as she walked in without knocking, making Lucas scream.

"It's just puberty. He's further into it than us because he's older."

Dustin said, giggling at both the fact that Lucas screamed like a little girl- and that he's convinced Mike's further into puberty.

"You know damn well there isn't a certain age for that, dipshit." Mike grumbled and went to the kitchen. There was a knock on the door so Dustin went to answer it and Max and Lucas just looked at each other awkwardly for a couple seconds, before laughing. Dustin walked back in with Will following close behind.

"Where's Mike?" he asked.

"He's in a *mood* ." Dustin moaned.

"When isn't he though?" Max muttered and Lucas snorted.

"I'm not deaf, you know!" Mike yelled.

"What's up with him, though? Has he said anything?" Will asked, plopping down in a chair.

"He seemed a little out of it on the way here." Lucas said. Will nodded.

"He probably had another fight with his dad. I heard he's been fighting with him since he asked him about the game tonight." Will said.

"How do you know that?" Max asked.

"Nancy, who told Jonathan who told me."

"Oh. Makes sense." Dustin said sadly.

"Apparently, his dad can't say a word to him without him getting pissed. Which is understandable, Ted can suck a-"

"Don't finish that sentence, asshole." Mike grumbled as he walked back in with a cup of water. Lucas snickered. "I'd rather not hear that."

Later on that day, when lunch rolled around, they made themselves sandwiches, which Mike barely ate.

“Are you okay, dude?” Max asked. “You’re like… quiet. You usually don’t shut up.” Mike glared at her.

“I’m fine.” he replied anyways. “Just tired.”

“You can like, take a nap or something if you want to, Mike.” Dustin said. “We’ll be quiet. Or if you wanna go home that’s totally fine too.”

“And listen to my mom complain on the phone with her friends and drink a bottle of wine? No thanks.” he rubbed at his eyes. “I’ll be fine- I’ll take a nap or something when I go home late, before tonight.”

“If you’re sure.”

After that, his mood changed for the better, but he wasn't the usual cheery Mike, but then again, he hasn't been all that cheery in over a year.

"Okay, what the hell?" Max asked Mike as he grinned. She, Mike and Lucas were riding their bikes home. Mike was going with them to take Max home- she was riding with Lucas.

"What?"

"What's got you so hyped up?" Lucas asked. He shrugged and rode his bike in circles around them.

"I do know, though, that I'm taking a nap when I get home." He said. The others just chuckled

"Don't forget to be at Will’s house around 5:00." Max told him. He looked at her weird. "To help out with the lights remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I will.” They dropped Max off and rode their bikes back to their neighborhood, mostly in silence. Mike was mainly thinking about the fact that December was half way over and the Byers are just now putting lights up, but after the last two years… yeah, he got it.

“I'll see you later!" he told Lucas and put his bike in the garage and

went in the house to greet his mom and sisters. "Will one of you wake me up at 4:45?" he asked. Karen and Nancy nodded and he went to lay on the couch- passing out almost instantly. Karen woke him up at 4:45 on the dot and he sat up, grumbling to himself about how tired he was. She smiled and patted his shoulder. He went to his room and got all his change and anything else he'd need, said his goodbyes and left. He arrived at the Byers house a few minutes after five.

"I was thinking you weren't going to show." Dustin said as Mike walked into the house. Mike looked at him weird.

"Dude, I'm just a few minutes late. It's only, " he looked at his watch and rolled his eyes, “it's only 5:11." Dustin snickered.

"Hey Mike, you willing to get up on the roof and help me? Everyone else is too scared." Jonathan asked. Mike chuckled and nodded. Jonathan got the ladder and held it as Mike climbed on the roof. He joined him as Will went outside to get their stereo and started a Christmas tape. "How good are you with a hammer and nails?" Jonathan joked. Mike acted like he was thinking for a few seconds.

"Eh, pretty good, I'd say." Jonathan chuckled.

"Good. Okay so, here's half of the nails and I want you to put about a foot's distance between each one, starting here." He pointed at the top of the roof, where it started to slope down. "We're starting here and then going all the way around. I'm gonna do this side. Got it?"

"Aye, aye, captain!" Mike saluted him and Jonathan chuckled. Around 5:30, El and Hopper arrived and Mike was literally just about finished, with his, as well as Jonathan's side. Jonathan had eventually left the boy to it and went back on the ground to help everyone else out. Mike was basically using the hammer and nails to let all of his anger and frustration with his dad out. When he finished with the nails, he realized that Hopper and El were there and waved down at them. El waved back at him excitedly and Hopper just gave him a small wave as he went inside to talk to Joyce. By the time he got back down from the roof, Hopper was back outside, ready to leave.

"We should probably get going, kid." Hopper told him.Mike nodded and looked at El.

"I'll see you after the game, okay?" he told her, kissing her cheek.

"Okay. Have fun." she smiled at him. He and Hopper got in the blazer and Mike waved at everyone as they took off.

The two spent the first thirty minutes at the arcade, Mike showing Hopper how to play the games- the only one he was somewhat good at was Pacman, and Hopper was thrilled to know he got a higher score than Mike.

“I’d probably do better if all my friends weren’t yelling at me to go four different ways.” Mike huffed, eyes trained on the screen in front of him. Hopper snickered as he took a sip of his drink.

“Sure.” Hopper offered and Mike rolled his eyes. Hopper chuckled and went to the bathroom.

“Hey Wheeler.” Keith said, Cheeto fingers tapping the top of the machine. Mike froze for a second before backing away from the game and crossing his arms, looking at the older teen with a scowl.

“What, Keith?” he huffed.

“Your sister hasn’t even looked my way, you know?”

“For good reason too, what’s your point?”

“You told me that you would help me get a date with her over a month ago, Wheeler. After I helped you figure out who that girl was.”

“First off,” Mike hissed, “I never said I’d get you a date with her. That was *Dustin* . I would never try and set her up with a disgusting pig like you. And second, you didn’t help us figure out shit, we figured it out on our own.”

“Is there a problem here?” Hopper butted in, standing next to Mike, crossing his arms.

“N-no sir.” Keith stuttered and rushed off.

“Has he put his hands on your sister, Mike?”

“Not that I know of, but if he has I swear to God.”

“I’m gonna have a talk with her later, then, see if he’s bothered her any. She can charge him with harassment if she wants to or think she needs to.” Mike nodded. “I’m glad you’re protective of your sisters, Mike. I’m protective of mine too.”

“You have sisters?” Mike asked, surprised. Hopper chuckled and nodded.

“That I do, it’s been years since I’ve seen them. I should probably get in touch with them soon… Anyways, I see this *Keith* kid watching us like a creep so do you wanna go to the bowling alley now?” Mike nodded.

“Definitely.” he said. “Did you see his Cheeto fingers? He’s the reason I don’t eat Cheetos.”

“You don’t eat Cheetos?” Hopper asked, furrowing his eyebrows. Mike shook his head.

“Nope.”

“You’re a weird kid.”

“That I am.”

On their way to the bowling alley, Hopper asked,

"So, I've been meaning to ask but, uh, are you and El...You know," Mike raised an eyebrow, "are you boyfriend and girlfriend or...?" Mike blushed.

"I haven't asked her yet." he scratched the back of his neck. "I don't think she knows what boyfriend and girlfriend is- or well, maybe she does, but she hasn’t said anything." Hopper chuckled.

"I'm sure if she hears the words she'll ask eventually. Either me, you, Joyce, or even Nancy." Mike nodded. "And I can tell how freaked out you are because you think I'm gonna give you *the talk* but I'm not. At least, not yet, because I trust that you're a good kid and won't hurt her, because you and I both know that if you broke her heart she'd

probably break your leg." Mike snorted and nodded at that.

"Yes sir. I don't plan on it. Ever, and that's a promise. I don't break promises."

While Mike and Hopper were gone, Lucas, Dustin and Will ran around outside in the snow while El and Joyce stayed inside and watched a Christmas movie while they were decorating the tree and the inside of the house. Halfway through the movie, she heard the word *girlfriend* . She's heard it before, and kind of understood the concept of it, but she wasn't sure so she asked Joyce,

"What would you call a girlfriend? And boyfriend?" Joyce looked at her, an eyebrow raised. "I know a little bit, but it's confusing still."

"Well, being boyfriend and girlfriend is when you go on dates, you know what a date is, right?" El nodded. "You hold hands and kiss. There are other things for when you're older, but I'll explain it then." El looked kind of confused at that but nodded anyway.

"Like me and Mike?" she asked.

"Well, yes, I guess. Has Mike asked you to be his girlfriend?" she shook her head. "Hm, he's probably just nervous. You know, you could ask him to be your boyfriend." Joyce said, smiling at her when her eyes lit up.

"I can?" Joyce nodded. "I thought boys had to ask girls."

"They usually do, but girls can ask boys too. There's nothing wrong with that." El nodded, a smile on her face. A few minutes went by until El asked,

"Are you and Hopper boyfriend and girlfriend?" Joyce almost spit out her drink when she asked that.

"Uh, no, we're not. We used to be, a long time ago."

"Why not now?"

"Well...we just drifted apart. I met the boys dad and he moved out to

the city."

"You drifted back together though, right? Kind of like me and Mike?" Joyce smiled, and nodded.

"We did."

"You should ask him to be your boyfriend." El said, grinning widely. Joyce chuckled.

"We'll see." Around the end of the movie, El asked another question,

"Can I call Hopper dad?" Joyce looked down at the girl.

"Well, that's a question you should ask him, but I think he'd love it if you did." El grinned.

"The birth certify thing says he's my dad."

"Birth certificate." Joyce corrected her, but nodded. "Yeah, it does." El smiled. The boys came inside, followed closely by Max, Jonathan and Steve.

"When did you two get here?" Joyce asked Steve and Max.

"A few minutes ago. Dustin called me and told me to pick her up and come over." Steve said. Joyce chuckled. Dustin basically had Steve wrapped around his little finger.

"Ah, okay. Well, I'll go make some hot chocolate while we wait on Mike and Hopper." They all grinned and nodded as she went in the kitchen. Jonathan followed her to help her, knowing she puts way too much sugar in it. The kids joked around with Steve for a few minutes until Hopper and Mike finally walked in with a couple of bags in their hands.

"What do you have there?" Joyce asked, smiling at the two. Hopper explained while Mike joined the others, hugging and giving El a quick not so subtle kiss.

"We went to the store on the way back and got some candy canes for El, since we didn't get any last night, and a couple of ornaments that

Mike thought she'd like."

"Awe, that's sweet of him."

"I also got you these," he grabbed a bag of chocolate covered raisins and handed them to her. She smiled. They're her favorite.

"Thanks Hop." he grinned back at her. They went in the kitchen to talk while the others began to help put ornaments on the tree, Joyce and El having already spread the branches out and put the lights on it. El was amazed by all the different ornaments, and would get frustrated when they didn't want to stay on the branch, so Mike helped her. Considering he could almost reach the top of the tree now, it wasn't that tall of a tree, she was just short, he put the ornaments where she wanted them.

"Who do you think should have the honor of putting the star on the top of the tree?" Jonathan asked.

"El." Mike fake coughed in his arm. Everyone laughed at that. El grinned at him and then at everyone else. Joyce handed her the star and Hopper picked her up so she could put it on top. Everyone clapped as they admired the tree, and El hugged Hopper.

Around nine o'clock, Steve left, taking Dustin and Max with him to drop them off. Jonathan had gone in his room to work on a project, so Mike, El, Lucas, Will, Hopper, and Joyce watched another Christmas movie. During a particularly quiet part of the movie, Mike sneezed loudly, causing the others to jump. He sneezed again, his hair flying wildly.

"Oh God." he sneezed again and Lucas and Will started laughing.

"Bless you." Joyce said, chuckling.

"Thank *sneeze* you."

"Well, this is gonna go on for about ten minutes so we might as well pause the movie." Lucas said. Mike sneezed again as an answer. El just looked at Mike with the most ridiculous look on her face. He would have laughed if he hadn't sneezed again.

"I'm gonna *sneeze* go to the bathroom." He sneezed again and did as he said. He came back a couple minutes later, shaking his head. "I hate when that happens." Lucas snickered.

"I, personally, think it's hilarious."

Saturday, December 22, 1984

"I don't understand, Ted. Why don't you ever want to spend time with us?" Karen asked her husband, who was sitting in his Lay-Z-Boy.

"I'm tired. And I don't want to go to some silly little parade. It's for children." Karen just shook her head and took Holly out to the car to put her in her car seat.

"Are you aware that you *have* children, *dad* ?" Mike asked.

"Mike." he heard Nancy say, trying to get him to stay out of it.

"I mean seriously, you have kids, and you *never* do anything with us? I mean, what's the point of us even calling you dad?"

"Michael, you will not speak to me like that!"

"Or what? What're you gonna do? Ground me? Take away my bike? Go ahead, because I don't give a *shit.* " Nancy was surprised, right along with Ted, because Mike usually tried not to curse in front of their parents. "But you know what? It's fine, because, it's not like you give a shit now, nor will you give a shit any other time. And another thing, how are you tired when you literally do nothing but sit your ass in that damn chair and watch the TV?" Mike walked towards the door, not even waiting for a response, and rushed Nancy out.

As he walked out of the house, he slammed the door behind him as hard as he could. He joined his mom and sisters in the car, silently fuming. They're meeting everyone at town square, where the parade is. Nancy decided not to say anything to him, knowing it'd probably piss him off even more.

See, the thing is, when Mike gets as mad as he is now, he starts crying, which pisses him off even more. They parked as close to the square as they could and Mike almost immediately got out and made his way over to Hopper, El, Joyce, Will, and Jonathan. He was furiously wiping at his eyes as he walked.

"Mike!" El exclaimed excitedly when she saw him. He gave her a weak smile and waved. She frowned, noticing how sad he looked. Before anyone else had a chance to say anything to him, El grabbed his hand and walked him over to a tree a couple feet away from them. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"My… it's nothing, really. I'm okay, El."

"Friends don't lie, Mike." she said, giving him a look. He sighed, giving in.

"I had another fight with my dad."

"Did he say something to make you sad?"

"No, no, I'm not sad or anything. Just… I'm just an angry crier, I guess." she raised an eyebrow.

"Angry crier?"

"It's when you get so mad all you can do is cry, basically."

"Oh." she bit her lip. "I've done that." he just nodded. He wouldn't look at her so she put her arms around him and pulled him into a hug. He buried his face in her hair, hugging her back.

"What's up with him?" Hopper asked Nancy as she joined he, Jonathan and Will, who were sitting on the sidewalk. Karen was standing with Joyce, talking.

"He kinda chewed our dad out." she said.

"Huh?"

"Yep, but I don't blame him to be honest. He never does anything. Literally, nothing. Except sit in the chair and watch TV and eat. Or go

to work, and he basically does the same thing there as he does at home. He said the parade is for children, and Mike called him out for it."

"What'd he say?" Will asked.

"He asked him if he was even aware that he has children." she said. "He even asked him what was the point of even calling him dad since he doesn't act like one."

"Wow."

"Damn."

"Well then."

"Yeah. I don't have the nerve to say something like that to him. Our mom doesn't either."

"When I was that age, and I said anything like that to one of my parents, I'd get my ass beat." Hopper said. "But, I mean, I don't blame him either. I'd like to pop Ted one good time in the face myself." Hopper said, which caused the three to laugh.

"Mike?" El asked softly, still hugging him.

"Hm?"

"Be my boyfriend?" she asked sweetly, releasing him just enough so she could look at him. His eyes widened at that.

"Uh, uh..." he let out a nervous laugh, but nodded. "Yeah, I uh, I was going to ask you...Eventually." she smiled widely and pecked him on the lips quickly, hoping Hopper wouldn't see. He smiled back at her. "Um, we should probably go back over to them. They keep looking back at us." she nodded and they let go, and she grabbed his hand. Hers were freezing cold, but his were warm. They walked back over to the small group, and El grinned at Joyce, who just grinned back at her.

"Hey, what's this?" Hopper asked, looking between the two.

"What?"

"Do you two have some silent conversation going on over there or something?" the two shrugged and said at the same time.

"No." he eyed them anyway, but turned his attention to Mike.

"Hey, kid." he held a hand out. Mike shook it and said,

"Hey Hop." Hopper could tell he'd been crying because of the redness of his eyes, but didn't comment on it.

"What time does this thing start?" he asked. As if on cue, music could be heard as the parade began. It was starting at the square, and then going through town. After the parade itself, there are games and different stands for food or drinks. Dustin, Lucas, and Max ran up to them, out of breath.

"Sorry we're late, my mom wouldn't let me leave until I found my gloves, which is why I have socks on my hands." Dustin said, holding his hands up to show them. They laughed. Everyone sat down on the sidewalk except for Mike and El, who stood behind Hopper and Joyce. Mike wanted to make sure she could see everything. She did, and she was amazed. She danced along with the music playing, and eventually had Mike dancing with her, which Jonathan made sure to record. When the parade was over, Jonathan and Nancy wandered off, which meant,

"Mike, could you take Holly to ride the ponies?"

"Mom!" he whined. She gave him a pleading look and he sighed. He reluctantly let go of El's hand and bent down to Holly's level. "Wanna go ride a pony?" he asked. She nodded and gave him a sweet smile.

"Yeah!" he grinned and nodded. He stood up and picked her up, holding her with both arms. She's a heavy little thing, and normally, he'd just hold her hand, but she's known to wiggle her way out of his grip to run off.

"Hey Hop, can we go show the ponies to El too?" Mike asked, giving him the puppy dog eyes.

"Don't you even try to..." He looked at Mike and rolled his eyes. "One day, I'll be able to resist you kids puppy dog eyes. Yes, you can show them to her. Make sure she's in between someone, and there is someone behind her at all times. And do whatever you want, I gave her some money, but be back here by the time they turn the tree back on, got it?" Everyone saluted him, except Mike, because he currently had a giddy four year old in his arms. He ruffled El's hair and smiled at her. "Go have fun, kid."

"Thank you dad!" The kids then made their way towards the ponies.

"Dad, huh?" Joyce asked. She and Karen grinned at him. He grinned.

"Yeah, she asked me if she could call me that when we got to the cabin Friday night. I'm not gonna lie, I shed a tear or two when she did."

"Awe, Hop!" Joyce gave him a side hug, and he held her there when she started to pull away. Karen smiled at the two, but they noticed the sadness in her eyes.

"Are you okay, Karen?" Joyce asked. Karen chuckled.

"Not really, no."

"Do you two want to go inside where it's warm and get some coffee?" Hopper asked, gesturing to the little cafe that was still open. "And we can talk about it if you want to." They both nodded, and the parents went on their way, as the kids laughed at how excited Holly was riding the pony. El was kind of sad that she couldn't ride one, since she apparently weighed too much according to the guy running it, but she was happy with being able to pet them.

"Hey, maybe next year, when the fair comes to town, you can ride the horses they have." Will told her. She furrowed her brows.

"Fair? Horses?" She looked at Mike for an explanation.

"Horses are just big ponies." He said. "They're taller. The fair is kind of like this, but bigger and has a lot of rides. It's fun."

"Yeah, if you like these types of things, you'll love the fair." Max told

her. She grinned.

"It comes two weeks, I think, before school starts back in August." Will said.

"Can we go?" El asked.

"We usually go every year. We didn't this year, but hopefully this new year we will." Dustin explained.

"But if Hop says you can, then definitely." Mike told her. She grinned happily and nodded, reaching up to adjust her hat.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

> I'm sorry for not updating! Like I've said on some of my other stories, I've been busy as hell and there's been a lot going on, and I honestly just haven't been motivated to write. No promises for the next chapter, but I'm hoping a lot sooner than this on!
>
> To those who read the original Home, do you know what I took out of this chapter? ;)
>
> The order in which everything that happened in the original is completely different here, just know that EVERYTHING does happen, just later on in the story.
>
> ALSO I'm changing Mike's birthday to March 7th cause why not?

Eventually, Mike spotted Nancy and Jonathan in the crowd, and with a fairly good bit of convincing, they took Holly to get some hot chocolate. He grabbed a hold of El's hand again, and the group of teens walked around the square, looking at the different games or mini-rides.

"What's that?" El asked, pointing at what looked like a house- but instead of straight lines and steps, it was curvy and looked like a balloon she'd once seen, but bigger. It was colorful, too- yellow, blue and red.

"It's a bouncy house." Mike explained. She furrowed her brows

"It's kinda like a trampoline. You can jump around in it." Lucas told her.

"Tramp-o-line?"

"Why don't we just go and show her?" Max asked. They all nodded. Since there weren't any kids in it, the person *watching* to make sure no one got hurt let the six go inside. They took their shoes off, which

confused El, but she followed suit anyway. They got in and started jumping. Surprised, she fell over and was bouncing all over the place.. It felt weird to her, but it was fun. Mike, laughing, stopped jumping and helped her up. He held her hands and gestured for her to jump with him. She did and grinned.

"I asked my mom for a trampoline for Christmas so hopefully I'll get it!" Dustin said loudly.

"I hope so. I love trampolines." Will said, jumping higher than everyone else.

"This is fun." El told Mike, who nodded in agreement. Mike slipped and took El with him. She fell on top of him, the two giggling. Once they realized that El was on top of him, they blushed and managed to get up without falling back down. After about ten minutes of jumping and attempting to do tricks, they got out so other kids could get in.

They walked around for a little while longer, buying a funnel cake to share- El ate most of it and made Dustin promise to have his mom make some homemade ones for when she was allowed to go out next year.

"Is everyone ready?" A random person called. The kids rushed to the square and found everyone except for Karen- which Mike found weird but figured she'd gone to the bathroom or was stuck talking to a friend. The small crowd responded with either yes, hurry up, or just yelled. He counted down from three and lit the tree. The lights had a bluish tint to them, and it covered the tree, and there was a gold star at the top, but it didn't light up. Mike couldn't help but smile at the look on El's face. She smiled at him widely, bouncing on her heels as her eyes went from ornament to ornament, loving how they sparkled with the lights.

"Do you like it?" he asked her quietly. She looked back at him and nodded, the smile never leaving her face.

"Pretty." she replied.

"Yeah...really pretty." he said, not looking at the tree, but at her. Her smile grew bigger at that. She glanced down at his lips and then back

up at his eyes. She leaned in and kissed him.

"Ooh!" Dustin exclaimed. Everyone had seen it. Mike blushed and looked down, afraid that Hopper would kill him or something, while El just smiled widely.

"I'm so glad I got a picture of that!" Nancy exclaimed.

"Boyfriend, girlfriend, or no?" Was all Hopper asked.

"Y-yes." Mike stuttered, his face turning and even darker shade of red.

"Remember what I said the other night?"

"Yes sir."

"Good." Dustin just started making jokes so Mike just looked down and covered his face with his hands in embarrassment. Don't get him wrong, he loved the kiss, but it was just that everyone was staring.

"Shut up dip shit." Max said, pushing Dustin. "It's cute."

"Did you just say cute?" Lucas asked.

"I will punch the both of you." she threatened.

"Nancy, take a picture?" El asked, who nodded happily. El wrapped her arms around Mike, and he finally uncovered his face and wrapped his arms around her hesitantly. Nancy took a picture of them smiling, and took another of El kissing Mike's cheek, causing him to grin the biggest grin he probably ever has. After hanging around the square for a little while longer, they all went to dinner, and Karen finally reappeared. Mike noticed her face was pink and she looked like she'd been crying, but he didn't have a chance to talk to her before Joyce sparked up a conversation with her.

When everyone said their goodbyes and went their separate ways, the Wheeler's made their way home, and when they did, Ted's car was gone.

"Where's dad?" Mike asked as they got out of the car. Karen didn't

reply at first, she just sighed and went and unlocked the door.

"Mom? What the hell is going on?" Nancy asked- quite loudly and scared Holly, who backed away from her, bumping into Mike's legs. "I'm sorry Holly." she apologized. "I didn't mean to be loud. Where is dad?"

"And where did you go earlier?" Mike added.

"Mike, Sweetie, can you put Holly to bed for me while I talk to Nancy." It wasn't a question. He sighed and nodded and took Holly's hand to lead her upstairs. Having put her to bed many times before, Mike knew her routine like the back of his hand. He took her in the bathroom to brush her teeth and as she did so, he got her pajamas. When she was done, he got her in her pajamas and brushed her hair for her. He waited for her to fall asleep before making his way back down stairs to the living room.

"Where's dad?" Mike asked and Nancy and Karen looked at each other and then him. Nancy scooted over on the couch to give him room to sit and Karen patted the space. He hesitated but sat down, looking back and forth at them.

"I needed to get some more money so I came home to get it, and when I went into your father and I's room… he was packing a bag." Mike tensed up, already knowing what she was saying. "I asked him what he was doing and he told me that he had a business trip he was going on and had to leave tonight."

"For how long?" he asked. She sighed.

"He said two weeks but… it could be longer, I don't know. We had it out. If you go into our room you'd see stuff all over the floor." she shook her head. "I was throwing pillows at him and knocked some stuff over and off the walls."

"I wish you'd have threw something heavier than a pillow at him." Mike muttered, taking a deep breath. "*Screw* that sorry piece of shit. I wish he wouldn't even come home."

"Michael-"

"I'm serious, mom. I wish he wouldn't. It's not like he's good for anything anyways!" he stood up, crossing his arms and turning back towards them.

"He pays the bills-" she started but he interrupted her again.

"That's all he does, mom! That and eat and sleep, that's it. He doesn't spend time with us- and now he's not even gonna be home for Christmas? What the hell? That's not what dads are supposed to do. They're supposed to love and spend time with their wives, their daughters, their sons- unless I'm seeing everything wrong and men are actually just pieces of shit that make *you* feel like shit."

"I know, Mike." she sighed. "I… I don't know what else to do, we can't leave. Well, we can, but we'd have to stay with your grandparents in Florida-"

"No!" The two siblings exclaimed.

"See? I don't want to take you away from your home. And it's hard to find a good job around here, one to pay these bills."

"Couldn't you divorce him and get child support?" Nancy asked.

"I could, yes, but I don't want to do that, Nancy. Believe it or not but I love him. I shouldn't, but I do. If I hadn't met him, then I wouldn't have you three. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me and I would never take it back, even if it meant never meeting the asshole."

"And we don't want you to keep having to deal with him, mom!" Mike threw his hands in the air. "Don't think we don't see the way you cry, or how you drink a bottle of wine after every fight and talk to your friends on the phone. I see it all the time and I hate it."

"I know, and I'm sorry." Karen rubbed a hand over her face and threw her hair. "I'll figure something out, okay? You two don't need to worry about this."

"I'll worry about it til he's gone." Mike grumbled, crossing his arms again.

"It's late, and you two should get to sleep. We'll talk more tomorrow, okay?" Karen said, finally. The two tried to argue with her but eventually gave in and hugged her goodnight and went upstairs together, silently.

"Night, Mike."

"Night, Nance."

Mike didn't sleep for very long, maybe three hours, before he woke up, drenched in sweat. It wasn't the worst nightmare he'd ever had- but he was glad he woke up before it *got* worse

All he could hear was screams and gunshots and something roaring- the sound of flesh being ripped apart. He knew that sound well. With a sigh and a groan, he wiped his face with his shirt and got up, changing his clothes. He threw them in the corner and went down as quietly as he could to get a drink of water.

He nearly had a heart attack when he saw his mom sitting at the table with her own cup of water, chin in her hands. She jumped a little when she saw him, but gave him a small smile.

"What are you doing up?" she asked quietly.

"Uh…" *Should I tell her it was a bad dream? Nah, it'll be better if she doesn't know*. "I got thirsty." he told her. She nodded and held her up up.

"Same."

Yeah, I'm sure that's why you're up. I definitely don't see the shiny tears on your face, mom.

"Are you okay?" he asked her, sitting across from her. She nodded.

"Yeah, I'm fine, baby. Don't worry about me." he started to argue but stopped when she gave him a look.

"It's okay if you're not." he said anyways.

"God, you sound so grown." she chuckled and he shrugged.

"I feel like I've had to grow up a little quicker." he said, mostly to himself. "It's not every day you run from the government or hide a superhero in your basement and take care of them." she chuckled, shaking her head.

"I still wish you had said something to me back when this all began." he shrugged. "I hope it's all over, though. El doesn't deserve what happened to her, and neither do the rest of you." he nodded in agreement.

It doesn't feel like it's over. Anything could happen.

"Yeah… you know, she uh… she asked me to be her boyfriend earlier."

"Did she? Go El!" she joked and he smiled a little, nodding.

"Yeah. I was gonna ask her eventually…" he mumbled. Karen grinned.

"I know you were."

Sunday, December 23, 1984

Mike eventually did go back to sleep, and he still had bad dreams- he wouldn't say nightmares for these, honestly. He didn't wake up until about ten the next morning. His reason for waking up was Holly jumping on him before Karen could stop her.

"Jesus Christ." he groaned, lifting his head slightly and looking at her.

"Good morning Mikey." she said sweetly.

"Morning." he croaked and gave a little wave to his mom.

"Alright, Holly, get off him." Karen told her, picking her up and putting her on the floor. "Go wake Nancy up now." Holly giggled and ran off. Mike sat up and looked at his mom.

"Is something wrong?" she shook her head.

"No, no, I just need to go shopping and I wanted to see if you wanted to come with me."

"If you want me to, I will."

"I wouldn't be asking you if I didn't want you to." she pointed out. He snorted.

"Good point. I wanna get El a present so… What time do you want to go?"

"About an hour. It'll give you time to wake up some more, eat breakfast and get ready." he nodded and stretched, his back cracking. "Christ, Mike, you are too young for your back to crack like that."

"So, where to first?" Karen asked.

"Uh... I don't know." she chuckled.

"We could just start off at the jewelry store next door to where Joyce works." she suggested and he nodded. It was quiet for most of the ride, other than what played on the radio. Karen parked as close to the store as she could and the two got out. When Mike got out, his wallet fell out of his pocket so he picked it up, only to drop it again, not once, not twice, but three times.

"Son of a bitch." he mumbled and they walked into the store, Mike opening the door and allowing his mom to go in before him.

"Ah, Mike! It's good to see you again!" The older man behind the counter said happily.

"Hi Mr. Martin." Mike gave him a smile. "This is my mom." he gestured to her and Mr. Martin smiled at her

"So, what are you looking for today my boy?" he asked.

"Um, something for my girlfriend." Mike said, his cheeks turning pink.

"You finally asked her, huh?"

"She um, she actually asked me. Uh, yesterday." he said, his face burning and he bit his lip.

"Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of! I was too chicken to ask my wife to marry me so she asked me, and we've been married 46 years now." he said, chuckling. Mike grinned at that. "So, do you have anything in mind? Maybe another charm or two for her charm bracelet you and Chief got her?" Mike nodded.

"I was thinking of earrings too but then I realized she doesn't have her ears pierced, so maybe a necklace?" Mike asked.

"Ooh Mike!" Karen exclaimed quietly and he turned to look at her. "What is it you two say to each other all the time? Just promise, right?" she asked. He nodded and she motioned for him to come over to her. It was a plain necklace, just a silver chain, but the charm was the word *promise* in cursive. She hadn't seen a grin on his face that big in over a year, and she wanted to burst into tears at the sight of it. He looked back at Mr. Martin and nodded, the grin never leaving his face.

"I'll take it."

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

> Sorry for such a long wait! I'm still typing on my phone so if there are any BAD mistakes, well, there's your answer. I hope you guys like this one, even though I didn't change or really add all that much.

Monday, December 24, 1984

Hopper let El sleep in an hour or two before waking her, explaining,

"If you don't be a moody little gremlin because I woke you up, I'll give you a surprise." her eyes lit up and she nodded, grinning at him. Normally, she was a little turd in the mornings. Definitely not a morning person.

When she walked into the little kitchen, she looked around for her surprise, raising an eyebrow at him when she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Hopper chuckled

"Sit at the table and I'll get it." he said. She nodded, her leg bouncing up and down. He went in the cabinet and pulled out a green box. He set it on the table and she looked at it weird.

"What is this?" she asked.

"This is a gingerbread house. Like in the movies." her eyes widened and all he could see were her teeth. "Me and you are going to decorate it today." the smile didn't leave her face as he opened the box and pulled everything out. There were many different candies and pieces of the house, and two packets of icing. She watched him curiously as he ripped open the pack of cookies and set them on a piece of cardboard that came with it. He handed her two of the pieces and she looked at them confused. He smiled and grabbed a pair of scissors, cutting the corner off both packets and handing one to her. "Just watch what I'm doing, okay?" he asked and she stood to watch him.

He put a square in the middle of one of the pieces he had- it looked like a window to El, so that's what it was. Then he put a couple of candies on it like it's a windowsill.

"You basically just do that, but you can put whatever you want on it." he told her. She pointed at the box.

"Can it look like that?"

"You can do it like that, yeah, but it doesn't have to be the same as on the box."

"On the box it's pretty." he chuckled and nodded.

"Go for it, kid."

Despite the fact that she's never done anything like this, her side of the gingerbread house looked a lot better than his did, which she found hilarious. After they decorated each piece they let the icing harden and then put it together, and Hopper took pictures of it, and then a picture of her sitting in front of it grinning.

"You did good, kid. It looks great." she stood up and hugged him. He was shocked, but happy nonetheless and hugged her back.

"Thanks dad."

"You're welcome, kid."

"What're you doing, kid?" Hopper asked later on that day, standing behind El, who was at the table with paper and crayons.

"Drawing a picture for Mike for Christmas." she replied.

"Oh, that's… great, kid."

"Draw one with me?" she asked.

"I don't know, I'm not that big of a drawer-" she ignored him and pushed a couple of pieces of paper into his chest and handed him

some crayons. He chuckled and sat across from her. "What should I draw?"

"You and Joyce." she replied, concentrating on her picture. He raised an eyebrow.

"Why me and her?"

"Because you love each other." she replied. "Saw you two kiss under the toe thing."he was shocked at that, but then he laughed at her explanation.

"Mistletoe, El." he corrected her, chuckling. "So, you saw that, huh?" she nodded, smiling at him. The two sat in silence for a few minutes, swapping colors every once in a while. When Hopper was done, he held it up for her to see. He drew two people, not really stick figures, but not very detailed at the same time, standing on a hill with a sun in the corner. She gasped at the words he'd written on it. Will you be mine?

"Does that mean boyfriend and girlfriend?" El asked. He smiled and nodded at her. She clapped excitedly, a wide smile on her face. She held up her picture. She'd drawn two stick figures and wrote their names underneath them, with a heart between them, and Merry Christmas Mike in big, red letters at the top, with different colored hearts all around it. He smiled at that.

"It looks good!" he complimented. "Mike will love it." she smiled at him widely. She put it down and looked at him.

"Can we build a snowman?" she asked. He chuckled and nodded.

“El wants me to buy MIke a striped shirt for Christmas.” Hopper told Joyce with a sigh. Joyce chuckled.

“She’s such a sweetie. That boy and his striped shirts, I tell you.”

“I’ve literally never seen him in anything other than a striped shirt. I might get him one of those and a regular T-shirt or something, Jeez.”

“At least he doesn’t wear striped shirts and striped pants.”

“God, don’t say that too loud and that’s what we’ll see at that silly Christmas party tonight.” she smacked his shoulder.

“It’s not silly, Jim.” she scolded. “The Wheeler’s throw one every Christmas Eve, and I know it’ll be a lot more fun without Ted’s sorry ass there.”

“Speaking of that fucker,” Hopper caught sight of striped shirts and headed that way, still speaking. “Can you believe he left on a business trip not even a full two days before Christmas.”

“Business trip.” Joyce said, rolling her eyes. He raised and eyebrow at her. “Karen has told me some… things, and we don’t think every business trip he goes on is an actual… business trip, you know?”

“Huh, that wouldn’t surprise me honestly. I remember how he used to be in high school. The only good he ever did for Karen was those kids, and that’s a fact.” Joyce nodded in agreement. He pointed at a shirt. “Think he’ll like that?” he asked. Joyce nodded and looked through the hangers and found the right size.

“This is the smallest size they have in this so… he’ll grow into it.” she handed it to Hopper, who snorted.

“You’d think Karen never fed the little shit with how skinny he is.”

“Lord I know, it worries me sometimes. I think it’s because he’s growing so much, though.” Hopper nodded in agreement.

“Oh, do you think he’d wear a hat?” Hopper pointed at a row of beanies. “Because if he doesn’t do something to that hair he needs to wear a hat.”

“I just wanted to tell you kids that we aren’t having our usual party this year.” Karen told them as she stirred a pot of macaroni and cheese.

“Then why are you cooking?” Mike asked, making a face.

“We’re not having the family over this year.” she explained. “Just your friends and their families and I asked the Hollands but they’ve gone on a trip this year.” Nancy bit her lip at the mention of them and nodded.

“Understandable.” she said.

"But I there's just one condition." Karen said with a grin.

"What?"

"You and your friends are gonna have to sing for us." she said, smiling a devious little smile. Mike groaned.

"Ugh, why?"

"Because you four haven't sung since you were eleven..." he raised an eyebrow. "No pun intended." he snorted at that and Nancy couldn't control her giggles.

"I don't know, mom. I'll have to talk to them about it." he said, biting his lip.

"At least one song, Mikey. Please?" he sighed.

"Fine, but only one song! Can they come over? Because we would have to practice you know." he said, giving her a look. She sighed, a small smile on her lips, and nodded. He got up and ran to the phone to call them. Lucas came right over considering he lived the closest, and Will and Dustin showed up at the same time.

"So we're singing together for the first time in three years, huh?" Dustin asked, wiggling his eyebrows. Mike rolled his eyes but nodded.

"Nancy can play the piano!" Karen called.

"What?" Nancy exclaimed. She looked at the four boys, who gave her the puppy dog eyes. "Ugh, I hate you guys. Hurry up and figure out what you're gonna sing so I can practice a little."

"Nah, you love us." Will said, grinning. She rolled her eyes.

"How about Away in a manger?" Lucas suggested.

"I don't know, I kinda wanna do Santa Claus is Coming to Town." Dustin said.

"Yeah, that's Holly's favorite song." Mike said.

"El likes Go Tell It On The Mountain." Will said. The three looked at him.

"How do you know?"

"Any time she comes over she makes me play it." he responded, shrugging.

"Well, I'm guessing Mike's gonna wanna sing that one so we might as well." Lucas said.

"Oh shut it, ass wipe."

"Why don't you just sing both songs? I mean come on, the songs aren't that long, and I know for a fact none of you have stage fright." Nancy said, giving them a look.

"Yeah but our voices have changed." Mike said.

"I, for one, have a great singing voice, especially now." Lucas said, grinning.

"I'm better, trust me." Dustin said, giving Lucas a little poke. Lucas just rolled his eyes.

"I'm okay." Will said. "Not the best, but I'm pretty good if I do say so myself."

"I don't really sing anymore so I don't know, honestly." Mike said, shrugging.

"Why don't you sing something now then?" Karen suggested.

"Yeah, I'd rather not."

"Oh come on, Mike! Don't be such a-" Lucas started to say but caught

himself, looking like a deer caught in headlights when he saw the look Mike gave him.

"I'll sing with you, Mikey." Nancy said, nudging him in the side. He groaned. “You’re gonna have to sing anyways, idiot, if we’re gonna practice.”

“Nancy, be nice to your brother.” Karen called. Mike stuck his tongue out at Nancy and she rolled her eyes.

“What are you, twelve?”

“No, I’m thirteen.”

“Shut up.”

The boys only stayed for about an hour, having decided to just do Away in a Manger as Will had suggested. They would definitely have stayed until tonight but their parents were forcing them to dress up- which Mike was not looking forward to because he knew his mom would want to take hundreds of pictures. Especially when she forced him into a nice outfit and made him do Holly’s pigtails while she continued cookie, or baking now. Nancy was too busy doing her makeup.

"Merry Christmas Eve!" Holly screeched when Dustin and his mom walked in.

"Awe, Merry Christmas Eve, Holly! I hope you're having a jolly time!" Claudia joked, hugging the smaller girl. Dustin ruffled her hair and she glared at him.

"You messed up my hair. Mikey!" she yelled. Mike came in from the kitchen, wearing black dress pants and a burgundy, long sleeved dress shirt.

"What's up?" he asked. She pointed up at Dustin.

"He messed up my hair. Beat him up."

"Holly, do you see these noodle arms? I couldn't beat him up if I tried." she giggled at that and ran off to get the hair brush for him.

"I hope you know I'm gonna start calling you Noodle now." Dustin told him. Mike gave him the stink eye.

"I hate you. Where's everyone else?" he asked.

"Lucas is taking forever to get ready, you know him, takes freaking two or three hour showers. He wants to smell extra good for Max, according to what he told me." Mike snorted.

"Wow."

"Yeah, and Steve is on the way to pick Max up, and I think Will, Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are on the way."

“Here Mikey!” Holly handed him the brush and he sighed, giving Dustin a look. Dustin snickered. MIke fixed her hair quickly and sent her on her way, and the two went down in the basement. "So, how much shit have you had to put up with so far today?"

"Nothing too bad, actually." Mike said, plopping down on the couch. “Mom hasn't asked me to do anything, other than try and keep Holly entertained, which was going fine until you and your mom showed up."

"Hey! It's not my fault your little sister has a crush on me." Mike laughed at that. And he laughed hard.

"What's so funny?" Lucas asked, bounding down the stairs.

"All I said is that Holly as a crush on me." Dustin said, clueless as ever. Lucas snorted.

"Nah, man, she doesn't have a crush on you."

"She's in love with Will." Mike said, snorting afterwards.

"Hmf." Dustin crossed his arms and pouted.

"Anyways, what were you guys talking about?" Lucas asked. "Before

Dustin thought Holly had a crush on him."

"He asked me how crazy it was here, basically." Mike told him, and went on to tell him that his mom wasn't making him do anything other than entertain Holly.

"Mike, your sister is hiding from me again." Will said, hopping down the stairs two at a time. Mike started laughing again and Dustin pouted, so Lucas took it upon himself to explain to Will what was going on.

"Well, don't you look spiffy." Steve said, opening the passenger door for Max, who rolled her eyes. She was wearing a red, long sleeved button up shirt and dark pants. Her hair was in a side braid, and she had the smallest hint of mascara and lip gloss. He snorted and shut the door, and grabbed the presents her mom was holding.

"You've got a little something in here too." Mrs. Hargrove told him.

"Well thank ya! You didn't have to do that."

"It's not a problem. Your gift to me is keeping her safe." He grinned at her and gave her a side hug, and then put the presents in the back seat and waved as he got in the drivers side. He drove off. "You do look nice though." he told her, nudging her arm. She chuckled.

"Thanks. You look like an idiot. What's with the bow tie?" she asked. He scoffed.

"How dare you." He said, dramatically, putting a hand over his heart. "I honestly just wore it so my mom would shut the hell up. She acts like it's prom or something. Not sure why she's making a big deal out of it, she usually doesn't care and isn't home." he shrugged. She laughed. "I'm gonna take it off before we go inside, remind me to." She nodded.

"I'll probably take my hair down too. Maybe get El to redo it."

"Why?"

"Blame Mike, actually."

"Of course."

"He taught her how to braid hair, and she insists on braiding mine whenever we're together. I don't mind though, she gets better at it each time."

"The girl's smart, she'll be ready for school by next year."

"God, I hope so. Mike whines constantly about not being able to see her everyday." Steve snorted.

"And you don't whine when you don't see Lucas?"

"Uh, no?"

"Sure." she smacked his arm and he just grinned.

“So… your mom is never home?” Max asked a couple minutes later. He shrugged.

“Neither of my parents are, actually. They go on a lot of business trips. Why do you think I used to throw so many parties and never get caught?”

“I didn’t know you during that time, King Steve.”

“Right, I’m so used to you at this point I keep forgetting you haven’t been here long.” she snorted, flipping him off. “Rude. Why do you ask though?”

“You mentioned that she isn’t home a few minutes ago.” she replied.

“Oh, yeah, I did, didn’t I?” she nodded. “Huh.”

They didn’t talk anymore until they got to the Wheeler’s.

"El, come on, Mike will think you look great in a potato sack dress." Hopper called. The kid's been in her room for the last hour, trying on different dresses. She poked her head out and glared, then made a

face.

"Potato sack dress?"

"I'll explain it in the car, come on, you don't want to be late, do you?" he asked. She sighed.

"Okay." she disappeared into her room again and came back out five minutes later. She was wearing a long sleeved, ankle length burgundy dress that had a dark green belt around her waist, and green flats to match. She wore a black head band, keeping most of her curls out of her face.

"You look great, El." Hopper told her. She smiled at him and grabbed her coat. "Go on and get in the truck, I'll grab the presents." he told her. She nodded and skipped out of the cabin.

By the time they were on the main road, she'd managed to find the best radio channel for Christmas songs, and was singing along to one of the ones she knew.

"You've got a nice voice there, kid." Hopper told her, and she beamed at him.

"Thank you. Mike is singing today." she said, smiling. He raised an eyebrow.

"He is?" she nodded.

"Yes, with Dustin, Lucas and Will. Mike told me on the supercom."

"Oh, okay."

"Mrs. Wheeler wanted them to sing."

"I figured." he chuckled. "I doubt they'd do it on their own."

"Why?" he shrugged.

"They just don't seem like the type to do that sort of thing." she looked at him and blinked. She shrugged and went back to singing. He chuckled, resisting the urge to ruffle her hair, because he knew

damn well she'd make him turn around and go back home so she could fix it.

"Are you giving Joyce the drawing?" she asked him. He glanced at her and nodded.

"Yep, I put it in an envelope and everything." he told her. She giggled quietly at that.

They were the last to arrive, meaning everyone was in the kitchen and living room, parents talking and Will chasing Dustin around the dining room table. Mike was standing next to Mr. Sinclair, talking to him, holding Holly with both arms. She'd insisted on him holding her, just so she could play in his hair. She was the first to spot El, and when she did, she shrieked right in Mike's ear.

"EL!" Mike almost dropped her, almost, but he did put her down and put his hand over his left ear, grimacing.

"Jesus Christ, Holly, can you get any loud-" he shut up when he saw El, and his jaw dropped.

"You're gonna catch a fly, Wheeler." Hopper told him, nudging him in the shoulder as he walked past him and into the kitchen to talk to Joyce. Mike blushed and grinned at El as he walked over to her. She immediately wrapped her arms around him and he hugged her back.

"You look amazing, El." he whispered. She grinned back at him.

"Ooh! Mikey's in trouble!" Holly said, giggling as she pointed up. Mike looked up and his cheeks turned an even darker shade of red. Of course, there just had to be mistletoe every damn where in the house. The boys started giggling and Max raised her eyebrows at him. El grinned at him mischievously, as if she knew something he didn't.

"You little sneak." he mumbled but kissed her. It only lasted a couple seconds, but his face was as red as Santa's hat when he pulled away. There'd been a flash, meaning either Jonathan or his mom took a picture. Mike grabbed her hand and pulled her into the living room, looking down at the floor as he did so.

"You guys are so childish." Nancy said, rolling her eyes at the boys.

"Yeah, shitheads, wait until you fall in love with a girl."Steve mocked, which resulted in getting smacked right in the face with a plastic ornament. "I deserved that." Mike glared at him.

"Oh my goodness, you two match! Did you plan that?" Mrs. Sinclair asked. Mike looked at El's dress and she looked at his shirt. Mike snorted.

"We didn't, actually." He said.

"What a coinkydink then!" Claudia said, and then laughed when Dustin started grumbling about her saying coinky dink.

"Who even says that?" he muttered.

"You literally said that a few minutes ago, hypocrite." Will said, raising an eyebrow at him

"Bite me, Byers." Will snorted.

"Please, please keep Holly entertained for me. She is driving me nuts in the kitchen." Karen told Mike. He snorted and nodded.

"Will do, mom." he told her. Walking back in the living room, he announced, "Alrighty, all the children sit down and we'll sing Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer!"

"There are only two children, Mike." Dustin said, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm talking about you too, Henderson. Get your ass on the floor." Dustin scowled at him. Mike turned to Steve, Max, and Lucas. "You three too."

"Wheeler!" Hopper barked, laughing. Mike snorted.

"Just because you're the oldest out of all of us doesn't mean we're children." Lucas said, rolling his eyes. They did sit down though, around the Christmas tree, where Holly and Erica were sitting. Hopper and Mr. Sinclair sat on the couch with El and Nancy, and Mike sat in the recliner. His mom, Joyce, Mrs. Sinclair, and Claudia were in the kitchen, talking to Jonathan, who was helping them cook.

"Anyone wanna start? Holly, you remember the names?" he asked. She looked up at him.

"Uh, kinda? Help me?" she asked sweetly. He smiled and nodded.

"You know Dasher and Dancer," he looked at her and she continued.

"And Prancer and Vixen, Comet and Cupid, And Donner and..."

"Blitzen." he sang. "But do you recall, the most famous reindeer of all?"

After that, everyone who remembered the lyrics sang along, while Holly giggled and danced with El. Jonathan had obviously left the kitchen to record every bit, upon the request by Karen. After about ten more minutes of Mike naming songs and everyone singing along, Karen announced that dinner was ready.

Almost everyone managed to squeeze into the table, having more than enough room for plates and cups because all of the food was in the kitchen instead of all over the table. Hopper, Mr. Sinclair, Jonathan and Steve stood while they ate, letting everyone else sit at the table

"What are these?" El asked Mike from her seat next to him. She held up her fork.

"String beans. They're better than peas, I promise." he told her. She made a face at them, but tried them. She made another face and said,

"Not much." he chuckled.

"I don't like them either, but mom makes me eat them anyways." she gave him a smile and ate the rest of them before eating the rest of her food. Everyone made small talk, and Lucas and Max were playing footsies under the table, which Will silently found hilarious. He was seated between Max and Holly, who would not, for the life of him, look his way.

"Holly!" he sang quietly, trying to get her attention. She wouldn't look at him. Karen raised an eyebrow at him. "Cat got your tongue, Holls?" he asked. She, in turn, looked at him and stuck her tongue out at

him, before giggling. He chuckled.

"Told you." Mike told Dustin, who sat on his other side. Dustin glared at him and then began explaining to El how good figgy pudding was.

"What is figgy?" El asked Mike.

"It's a fruit." he explained. "It's really called a fig, but people say figgy pudding. I don't know why."

"Like a nickname?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"Can I call you a nickname?" he raised an eyebrow and nodded, taking a sip of his water. "Beans." he choked on his water.

"Beans? Why beans?" he asked, and Hopper, who had overheard their conversation, started laughing.

"Because you're a beanpole." she said, shrugging innocently. "Dad called you that last night." Mike turned and looked at Hopper, who just raised his eyebrows as he drank his drink.

"I don't know what she's talking about, Beans." El giggled and Mike huffed playfully, pouting.

"Does that mean we can call you that too, Mike?" Max asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Nope." he said, popping the P. "Mike is just fine."

"You're no fun." she said, rolling her eyes. Mike shrugged.

"Only El can call me Beans, now. Hop can stick to Beanpole if he wants." Hopper laughed again and went in the kitchen.

"We can call him Noodle." Dustin told the rest of the party. "He said he had noodle arms earlier, therefore, he is Noodle Mike."

"Shut up, Dustin."

"Michael! I swear, if you give yourself a concussion, I will beat your ass!" Karen called as he chased Holly down the hall. Mike laughed, finally catching a giggling Holly and carrying her back in the living room, where everyone was waiting on him.

"Jesus, Holly, you're getting heavy."

"No, it's just your noodle arms, Noodle." Dustin told him. Mike glared at him, putting Holly on the floor and promptly grabbing a pillow and whacking him in the face with it.

"Shut your face, Dusty." Mike mocked, dancing away from Dustin's hands as he tried to smack him. He sat on the other side of Lucas, who rolled his eyes at the two.

"Okay, shitheads, do your thing." Steve told them. The four teens glared at him and he snickered.

"We're singing Away in a Manger because this is El's first Christmas, and her favorite Christmas song." Mike said, cheeks turning pink when he saw Dustin and Lucas give each other a look. He glared at them. He sighed and counted to four and they started singing.

"That was good music." El told him once it was over, planting a kiss on his lips. Dustin snickered at the face Mike made when she pulled away, his face redder than ever.

"So, presents now, yeah?" Mrs. Sinclair asked. The teens nodded, eager to open and give presents.

Everyone swapped presents, mainly just clothes from the parents, and the kids had done secret Santa for the most part, but made an exception for El and Mike. Will got new crayons from Max, Max got stickers to put on her skateboard from Dustin, as well as a couple wristbands from Lucas that had various quotes or sayings on them, Dustin got candy from Lucas, and Lucas got a new action figure from Will. Mike decided to wait and give El her necklace later, before she leaves, but she did give him hers, along with the beanie from Hopper.

"You do know she's probably gonna steal it right back at some point?" Jonathan asked him, nudging him. "Nancy does the same thing."

"That explains a lot." he muttered, but grinned at El in thanks. "I don't care, I like it." he put the beanie on, hardly taming his curls, and thanked Hopper.

“That didn’t work out like I thought it would.” Hopper told Joyce, who laughed.

"So, this was Hoppers idea, but, us older teenagers, me, Nancy, and Jonathan, pitched in and helped with the costs." Steve said, handing each of them a small box. They opened them and revealed dog tags. "One has your name and birthday, and the other has your saying, friends don't lie and your D and D name. Like, Mike's says Paladin, El is Mage, Max is Zoomer, and so on." he explained. The boys grinned and put theirs on automatically, thanking them. Meanwhile, El hugged the four while Max just high fived or fist bumped them, and then put theirs on.

A little while later, Max and Mike were coming back from getting drinks when they saw Hopper and Joyce kissing under the mistletoe.

"It's about damn time!" Max hollered, whooping and running into the living room. Mike stared, wide eyed for a second as the two adults looked at him sheepishly. He pointed at them accusingly.

"Not in front of the children!" And joined everyone else in the living room.

A couple hours later, once wrapping paper that had once covered the entire floor was cleaned up, and as was the kitchen, to-go plates made and ready to go, everyone left, Hopper and El being the last to leave as usual. Mike pulled El up to his room while Hopper talked to Karen.

"You put my picture up!" she said excitedly, sitting on his bed. she’d given it to him not long after everyone finished opening presents, and he almost immediately went and put it up in his room. He smiled and nodded, opening the top of his drawer and pulling out the wrapped box. He sat across from her and handed it to her.

"I wanted to wait until everyone else left." she smiled at him and nodded, tearing the paper off it. She fumbled with the box a little and opened it, her eyes widening immediately. "Um, my mom helped me pick it out but I bought it." he said. "It's one of the first things I taught you and it means a lot to me. I understand if you don't like it, I can take it back or-" she interrupted him with a quick kiss and holding the unclasped chain to him.

"Put it on for me?" she asked sweetly. He blushed and nodded, taking it from her. He made sure the word was facing the right way and put it on. She turned back around and scooted closer to him, hugging him. "It means a lot to me too. Love it, Beans." he chuckled and hugged her back.

"I'm gonna figure out a nickname, other than El, for you soon. I promise." she let him go and he winked at her. She giggled.

"El! Let's go before the snow starts again!" Hopper yelled. She rolled her eyes and stood, pulling Mike with her.

"Oh! First I want to take a picture of the three of you! El, I love the necklace on you! It's so pretty." Karen said, grabbing her camera. Mike noticed Hopper's barely there eye roll at the mention of pictures and he nudged him.

"I hate pictures too." Hopper snorted and nodded.

"Same, kid. Nice choice of necklace, I don't think she'll ever take it off." Mike smiled, wrapping an arm around her waist as Hopper put his hands on each of their shoulders and smiled for the camera.

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

> Damn it wasn't even a whole month since the last time I updated, who am I and what have I done with B???? Anyways, the season 3 trailer is out. I freaked out for a LONG time, made my own theories. Y'all comment some theories you have if you want to lmao.
>
> Also, thank the trailer for this because if I hadn't got any content it probably would've been another two months before this came out.

Saturday, January 19, 1985

El was sure to tell Mike that she was wearing her necklace, and always made sure to have Hopper tell him when he talked to him and she couldn't. The couple haven't seen each other in two weeks, the father and daughter having gotten snowed in at the cabin- Hopper and Karen wouldn't let Mike *attempt* to ride his bike or walk to see her- and by the time Hopper dug a path out, she was sick with a bad cold, losing her voice along with it.

He had talked to El multiple times over the phone before she lost her voice, as well as Hopper, who kept him updated on how she was doing. Mike had been a cranky little asshole, according to Nancy, the whole two weeks, but today would change that. Most of the snow had melted, as it'd gotten a little warmer and the sun was shining, though it'd probably snow again before spring arrived.

Mike, for the record, had a good reason to be a cranky little asshole. He couldn't see his girlfriend, he couldn't be with her while she was sick, and his nightmares have been going ape shit. Thankfully, as of late, he can't remember them, he just knows they're terrifying and wake him up all through the night, so he's tired. Cut him some slack!

"Michael!" Karen yelled, multiple times, before her thirteen year old, overly dramatic son trudged his way downstairs, where she and his

sisters were waiting. Ted has yet to come back from his *business trip* .

"What?" he grumbled, plopping down on the couch.

"While you were up there moping about not seeing your girlfriend, Hopper called." Nancy said. Mike perked up, then glared at her. And immediately got worried.

"Just Hopper? Is El okay?" he asked.

"She's fine, Mike." Nancy said, patting his shoulder. "He said that if you promised to stop being a cranky little asshole, he'd bring her over today, *and* pick up the rest of your little nerd friends, sans Lucas at least. His scrawny ass can walk over here himself." Mike perked up again but narrowed his eyes at her at the insults.

"Well you're being an almost legal adult cranky asshole." He retorted and stuck his tongue out at her. Nancy just rolled her eyes. "But I promise," he muttered. "Is that all you wanted? Because if so, I plan to go back upstairs and mope until she gets here." Karen couldn't help but snort at that and shake her head at him. She flicked a curl out of his face.

"No, that's not all. You two sit on either side of him, okay?" she said, and Nancy plopped down to his left and Holly to his right. "Do you remember when I told you on Christmas that I had another present for you? But we had to wait for it to be finished?" the three nodded, but then Holly shook her head.

"I kind of forgot." she said, giggling when Mike poked her in the side. Karen smiled.

"Well, a friend of mine got it for me yesterday and held it until this morning. It's in the garage, but I'll bring it to you." she left without another word and the three siblings looked at each other.

"Do you think it's a little pig?" Holly asked. Mike and Nancy looked at each other and tried to hold back their laughter.

"I'm not sure, Hols, do you *want* a pig?" Mike asked her. She shrugged.

"They're cute when they're babies but then they get ugly. I want one of the ones that stay little." Mike snorted and Nancy pinched his arm.

"Maybe one day, Holly." Nancy told her and Holly just smiled widely and nodded.

"Okay, all three of you close your eyes and Mike, hold out your hands." Karen called, hiding behind the wall coming into the living room.

"Why me?" Mike made a face but did as he was told.

"Because you're sitting in the middle." she replied, her voice noticeably closer. He felt the weight of whatever it was and then froze as it started moving.

"Mom." he said, not opening his eyes. She laughed. "Mom, you didn't."

"Open your eyes and see." he could tell by the excited scream that Holly opened her eyes first, and then the awing coming from Nancy. He opened one eye and looked at the puppy as it squirmed, licking at his face. He opened both eyes and laughed, tilting his head back and holding the puppy, which was a girl, a bit further away so she couldn't reach his face. "I figured that since your father never wanted animals, that we could get one now that he’s hardly ever home anymore."

"Was this just to spite him or did you actually want a dog?" Nancy asked as Mike held the puppy with one arm and scratched behind her ears, smiling as Holly giggled when the puppy licked her hand.

"A little bit of both, actually." she said sheepishly. "But I don't care what he thinks. It’s not like he’s gonna have to clean up after her- he wouldn’t do it to begin with. I've always wanted a dog, since I was a little girl, but you know how grandpa was allergic so we couldn't get one. And I never lived on my own long enough to get one." Nancy nodded.

"Does she have a name or do we get to name her?" Mike asked.

"You get to name her."

"You three come up with it then, I'm not good with names."

"You technically named El, you know." Nancy said, looking at him pointedly. He furrowed his eyebrows.

"Not really. All I did was take the El from eleven. It's literally two letters." she snorted and shrugged.

"I like Rosie." Holly said, looking at them.

"Where'd you get that name from?" Karen asked. She shrugged.

"Roses are pretty, and she's pretty." she explained. The three looked at each other and laughed.

"Rosie it is, then." Mike stated, and handed her to Nancy and hopped up. "I'm going to go tell the guys and Max." he said and ran to the basement, where his Supercom was. "Guys, are you there? Over."

"I'm here. Over." Dustin's voice rang. The other three followed soon after.

"What is it, Wheeler?" Max asked. "...Over."

"I got a *puppy*. "

Almost immediately after their call ended, Lucas ran over (he loved puppies for some reason) and almost squealed when he saw her.

"You better be glad your girlfriend wasn't here to hear that." Nancy told him, an eyebrow raised. He flipped her off and she laughed.

"The others are coming too, right?" Karen asked Mike. He nodded.

"Yeah, Hop's picking them up." he replied, sitting on the couch and watching Rosie attack Lucas' face while he laughed. In the time Mike had called his friends over the Supercom, Holly had fallen asleep for her nap, so she was up in her room.

Twenty minutes later, there was a honking from outside, and the second Mike opened the door, his face was full of dark curls and he

almost fell over.

"Mike!" she shrieked. He barely managed to catch her, but did and laughed, hugging her back. "I missed you."

"I missed you too." he kissed the top of her head. Max pretended to gag and promptly walked into the house to find Lucas, whereas she started laughing at his predicament, and Will and Dustin joined in on the laughter. Rosie decided she wanted to sit, and sat on his head. Mike looked at El, who was staring at the puppy with interest. "Have you ever seen a dog before?" he asked. She looked at him, eyebrows furrowed.

"Demo...dog?"

"No, no, she's not at all like them, promise." he told her, and lead her into the living room. He sat them on the floor a few feet away from the others and said, "She's sweet. She might bite you but it wouldn't hurt you, she doesn't know any better." he let out a low whistle and Rosie let out a tiny noise and ran to him, licking and biting at his hand. He snorted and picked her up, holding her out to El. "Here, she won't hurt you. I promise." she hesitated for a split second, but then took her, and jumped when Rosie licked her hand. Mike laughed and she giggled, petting Rosie's back.

"What's her name?" Will asked.

"Rosie." Mike replied.

"You named your dog Rosie?" Dustin asked, snorting.

"Okay first off, you named your turtle Yertle." Mike said.

"Eh, true."

"Is there a second?" Max asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Second, Holly named her."

"Why'd she choose Rosie?" Lucas asked. He shrugged.

"She just said because roses are pretty, and that Rosie was pretty,

so..."

"That might be my fault." Will said, making a face. "She asked me to draw her a picture to color the last time I came over, and I drew a bunch of roses. She wondered why and I said that they were pretty." Mike full on laughed and said after a couple seconds,

"I don't know how much longer you're gonna deny it, but Holly has a *serious* crush on you, dude."

Monday, February 11, 1985

Mike was falling. It was the quarry all over again, but this time, El wasn't there to save him. She was *gone* because of *him.* He let them take her. He was screaming, terrified screams as he fell through the air. He thought heard Dustin screaming his name, but all he could actually hear was the blood rushing to his head and the wind.

"Mike! Wake up!"

He sat up so fast he knocked foreheads with Nancy, who had shaken him awake.

"Fuck." she muttered quietly, hand on her forehead. "Note to self, don't wake him up like that again." she put her hands on his shoulders and made him look at her. "Hey, Mikey it's okay. It was just a dream." he brought his knees up to his chest and made grabby hands for her, and she hugged him tightly. He was breathing hard, letting out small whimpers as he tried to calm down. She rocked back and forth a little and ran a hand through his hair. "It's okay." eventually, the whimpers turned into sniffles, so she asked, "Do you wanna talk about it?" he started to shake his head but stopped and nodded. He cleared his throat a little.

"I was falling." he said quietly. "The quarry thing happened again but... El wasn't there because... because I *let* the lab get her and I was going to die. I *know* it wasn't real and that she's fine but..."

"It's scary." she finished. He nodded and wiped at his eyes, sniffing. She squeezed his shoulder gently and looked at the clock. Three

o'clock. "We have a couple more hours until we have to get up, do you want me to stay with you?"

"Um... You don't have to." she took that as a yes and stood, pulling back the blankets some and nudging him until he scooted over enough. She laid back and put her arm across his pillow.

"Lay back." she told him softly. He did as he was told and laid down and she wrapped her arms around him. He curled up a little, pulling the blankets over them. He jumped when he felt something down at his feet, “It’s just Rosie.” he nodded. Rosie curled up at the end of his bed. It was a couple minutes of Nancy playing with his hair that he fell asleep, and he didn't make another sound that night.

Despite having fallen asleep pretty easily and not having anymore dreams after the first, Mike was still tired and ready to go back to bed, but he sucked it up and went downstairs for breakfast.

"You okay, Mike?" Karen asked, ruffling his hair. He nodded, taking a bite out of his toast. Rosie hopped her way over to him and nuzzled his leg. He grinned slightly and scratched her behind the ears.

“Yeah, just couldn’t sleep much.” he shrugged. Nancy gave him a look and he looked back at her, widening his eyes as if saying *don’t you dare* .

“Something on your mind?” Karen asked. Mike glanced at his dad, who was reading the paper in his recliner.

“Not particularly.” he looked back at his mom and she nodded in understanding. He hated lying to her, but his asshole of a dad *was* on his mind, and not in a good way. He kicked Rosie a couple nights ago when she wouldn’t leave him alone and Mike threw a cup of water at him for it, so now he was grounded. At least, while his dad was around he was.

"Well... if you need to talk you can always come to me, okay?" Karen told him. He nodded and gave her a smile. She walked by him to take a sleepy Holly her juice and ruffled his hair again, making it stick up all over the place.

"Mom!" he whined, patting his hair back down in an attempt to tame it. She chuckled.

"Well, you two better get going or you'll be late." she told them. They both groaned but got their stuff and left in Nancy's car after saying their goodbyes.

“So, are we gonna talk about it?”

“About what?” he asked.

“Don’t give me that shit. What was that last night?”

“Just a bad dream, Nance. That’s all it was. I told you that last night.”

“Yeah, but why didn’t you tell mom about it?”

“She worries too much, Nancy.” he huffed, crossing his arms.

"Alright, you little turd, after school we're gonna make hot chocolate and sit in the basement and talk, okay?" he raised an eyebrow at her.

"Talk about what, exactly? The dream?" she shook her head.

"No, neither of us have shared everything that happened, either time, so that's what we're gonna do. Maybe that'll help. Plus, we’re gonna talk about what you’re gonna do for El for Valentine’s day.” Mike gasped.

“That’s this week!” he exclaimed.

“It sure is! Better start thinking about what you wanna do-”

“No, I know what I’m gonna do, I need to talk to Hopper about it first though.” she raised an eyebrow at him.

“Okay then,” she stopped in the parking lot at the middle school. "Okay, go on. I'll see you later?" he nodded.

"I’m going to the station after school though. Bye!" he jumped out of the car and jogged over to the rest of his friends. Dustin started laughing. "What?"

"And you guys thought *I* had bad hair at the snowball? Your head actually looks like a damn birds nest." Mike rolled his eyes and flipped him off.

"Oh come on, it's nowhere near as bad as yours was, Dustin." Will rolled his eyes. "But what happened though, seriously?" Mike huffed in annoyance and crossed his arms.

"Mom." was his answer.

"Figures. C'mere, Wheeler." Max said. He took a couple steps forward and she started attempting to flatten his hair down a little. "God, when did you start turning into Dustin? Fucking curly ass hair." Mike jumped back a little in surprise at her choice of words. She made a face as Lucas and Dustin started giggling. Max snickered and Will raised his eyebrows. "What? It's not like *you* haven't said it before, Wheeler."

"Yeah, when I was a toddler and didn't know any better." he shook his head a little. "But I don't care, it just surprised me."

"Why? 'Cause I'm a girl?" she raised her eyebrows.

"Uh, no? Nancy said it this morning because I accidentally head butted her."

"You accidentally head butted your sister." Will deadpanned.

"How the hell did you do that?" Lucas asked. The bell rang and they started making their way inside.

"I'll explain at lunch." he said, breaking off from the group with Will in tow. He heard Lucas start grumbling about excuses but Mike didn't want to be late, so he just rolled his eyes and continued on his way, talking to Will about the supposed partner project they were starting today.

"What do you guys think's up with Mike?" Lucas asked. "He hasn't been acting right."

"This is Mike we're talking about, Lucas." Dustin said. "He hasn't

acted right in over a year."

"True, but you'd think that since El is back he'd be different."

"He is different." Max said. "First, he's nice to me. Second, he's completely different around El than he is with us."

"That's my point, Max, he's not right with us! He used to joke around and shit but he doesn't really do that anymore."

"He does look like shit a lot." Dustin said, rubbing his chin. "He fell asleep in Social Studies this morning."

"That…" Lucas started. "Is not good."

"Like you two haven't fallen asleep in class before." Max rolled her eyes.

"Nope." They chorused.

"None of us have." Dustin said brightly. "We're nerds, Max, we're not the type to fall asleep in class."

"Good point. Carry on." she motioned for them to go on with the conversation.

"He probably hasn't been sleeping 'cause of his parents or something." Lucas said. "They've been fighting a lot, is what my mom told me."

"How does she know?" Dustin asked, cocking his head to the side.

"She stays up pretty late, she can hear them screaming at each other when they're in the kitchen." he replied.

"Damn." Max pushed her food around on her plate.

"He's probably worried about what he's gonna get El for Valentine's day." Dustin reasoned, hoping that was all it was.

"Holy shit Valentine's day is this week." Lucas muttered.

"Mhm. Did you forget, Stalker?" Max asked, raising an eyebrow.

Lucas scoffed.

"Psh, no." he shook his head. She rolled her eyes and looked towards the cafeteria doors for Mike and Will. As she did so, Lucas made an *oh shit* face at Dustin and he choked on his milk.

"You good?" Max asked, turning back around to face them. Lucas just shrugged and Dustin slapped his chest.

"I'm *great* ." he managed. She made a face and started eating her own lunch. She jumped when Mike and Will finally sat down, making the loudest possible noise. Mike buried his face in his arms and she looked at the other two. Will just looked smug. Max kicked his knee lightly.

"What's wrong dude?" Lucas asked.

"I... am scarred for life." he said, muffled by his jacket.

"What happened?" Dustin asked.

"Will dropped his pencil last period."

"How did *that* scar you?"

"He said the *F* word when he did it."

"Oh my *God.* " Max started laughing at him saying *the F word* instead of the actual word and Dustin choked again. Lucas snorted.

"I guess Will isn't as innocent as we thought he was."

"You guys won't hear me say it, that's for sure." Will said, shrugging. "I only said it to freak out Mike and it worked."

"You *ass.* " Mike sat up, shaking his head, trying to get his hair out of his eyes.

"You need a haircut." Will said.

"No." Mike shook his head again. "Damn it." he pushed it away with his hand this time and grabbed his bagged lunch, dumping it's

content on the table.

"Okay explain why you head butted Nancy this morning." Dustin said after a minute or two.

"I was having a bad dream and she apparently heard me and tried to wake me up. I sat up and we knocked foreheads."

"Christ." Dustin rolled his eyes. "That's siblings abuse. Is that a thing?" he asked.

"I wish." Max scoffed, stabbing the straw into the milk carton. They were quiet so she looked up and saw them looking at their own food. "What?"

"Sorry I said that." Dustin mumbled.

"What, the siblings abuse thing?" he nodded. "Don't worry about it. He hasn't tried bothering me since I stabbed him in the neck. Like he hasn't even *looked* at me. And when Neil starts trying to yell at me Billy will do something to make him get yelled at instead."

"That's good." Will said.

“And shocking.” Mike took a bite out of his sandwich.

"If he bothers you again, we'll get Mike to get Hopper to arrest him." Mike scowled at Lucas. "I mean, he is his father-in-law after all."

"Oh fuck off, Sinclair." Mike sighed. “I need a nap.”

Even though he's done it a couple times before, Mike still felt weird going to the police station. He didn't even get a chance to speak to Flo, other than a quick smile and hello when she called,

"Hey Hop! Mr. Wheeler's here to see you!"

"He can come back!" Hopper called back.

"Go ahead, Sweetie." she nodded towards his office. He smiled at her and made his way to the office. Hopper was taking a sip of coffee

when he walked in.

"Hey, Hop."

"Hey, kid. Sit down." Mike sat down and put his book bag on the ground next to him. "You come here right after school?"

"Yeah." Hopper chuckled. "What?"

"I've been wondering when you were gonna come and talk to me. Didn't think it'd be three days before Valentine's day." Mike blushed, shrugging.

"I kinda forgot that it was coming up. I need a nap." he muttered. "But I know what I want to get her, but I need your permission first."

"Jeez, kid, you sound like you're asking for permission to marry her or something." Mike's eyes widened and his face turned a bright red.

"N-no." he stuttered. "I, um, I want to get her a kitten."

"A kitten? She did tell you about what they did... there, right?" Mike nodded immediately.

"Yeah, *but* we went to Dustin's house last week and they have a cat, and she fell in love with it. Her, I think? I don't know. Anyways, she actually asked me if she could get one and I didn't know how to respond so I said maybe in the future."

"Okay. And where do you expect to get one?"

"One of my neighbors cat had kittens a couple weeks ago. She said that they'd be ready to adopt by Monday, as in today so... I asked her about it yesterday and she said they were already trained to use the litter box and everything and were eating solid food and ready to go. And they're free." It was obvious how nervous he was, and how much he wanted to do this for her. It didn't take much to convince Hopper to begin with, so he just laughed.

"Calm down, kid. You can get her a cat. Boy or girl?"

"Really?" Mike's eyes widened a little, a grin forming on his face. "I

didn't expect you to go along with it." Hopper snorted. "Uh, probably a girl? I don't know, I asked mom about it and she said the boys spray too much or something." he shrugged.

"Yeah, I'd rather have a girl. Gonna get her fixed as soon as she's old enough though." Mike nodded. Hopper looked at his watch. "I get off at five, a little less than two hours. You wanna hang around here and do your homework or something? And then we can go buy stuff for the cat." Mike nodded enthusiastically.

"I was worried about that the most, other than whether or not you'd say no." he said, pulling his books out of his bag. "Finding time to go get it because tomorrow I have a project that me and Will need to work on at his house and that'll take forever so I'm staying over tomorrow night." he babbled. "And then Thursday is Valentine's day and I'm getting her flowers and candy too so today is like the only day I could go get stuff." Hopper chuckled. "What?"

"Nothing, it's just... there's no doubt in my mind that you're Karen's kid." Mike raised his eyebrows. "You sound just like her, worrying about everything. You're like a mix between her and Joyce."

"Wow." Mike deadpanned, then snickered, "I *do* sound like her. God, I need to chill." he shook his head at himself and sat Indian style in the chair, just barely able to with his long legs, and a peaceful silence fell over them, the only sound being Mike flipping a page over or the scribble of his pencil. After a few minutes, Hopper asked,

"Speaking of your mom, does she know you're here?" Mike nodded, eyes trained on a math problem.

"Yeah, I called her after school. She was cool with it." Hopper snorted and nodded, even though Mike hadn't paid any attention to the movement.

Within an hour, he was done with his homework and had packed everything up, looking around the room. He'd taken his jacket off and was wearing the sweater they'd gotten him.

"You like the sweater, kid?" Mike looked at him and nodded.

"Yeah, it's comfortable. I usually wear the hat too but I was rushing this morning and forgot it."

"Really?" Hopper asked. He nodded again.

"I wear the dog chains too." he pulled them out of his shirt and showed it to him. Hopper grinned.

"Well... good, kid, that's good." Mike was quiet for a couple minutes and Hopper looked up, seeing that Mike had a tiny grin on his face. "What?"

"So... you and Mrs. Byers?" he asked. Hopper blinked at him and Mike wiggled his eyebrows. Hopper started laughing. Mike grinned wider. He hadn't said anything to him about it, even though it's been about a month and a half since he and Max caught them kissing. "What?"

"Sorry, I just thought about what you said when you caught us kissing. *Not in front of the children.* " Mike snickered. "And I'm surprised you've waited this long to ask about it. The redhead," Mike snorted at that, Hopper rarely ever called her by her name, "asked almost immediately after. But, if you must know, we are... kind of dating."

"Kind of dating?"

"I mean... I guess you could say were together."

"Like boyfriend and girlfriend?" Hopper nodded. "Who asked, you or her?"

"What's it to you, kid?"

"Just wondering." Mike shrugged.

"Joyce." he mumbled. Mike snickered and Hopper glared at him playfully. "Hey! You shouldn't be laughing, you turd, I already know that it was El who asked you!"

"That's *why* I'm laughing." Mike said, grinning. "El told me that Mrs. Byers is the one who told her that girls could ask boys too, and not just the other way around. She'd asked me why Mrs. Byers wouldn't

ask you but I didn't know what to tell her." Hopper snorted.

"When *was* this?"

"Christmas Eve." he replied.

"Figured." Hopper shook his head, shrugging. "Okay kid, since you're so keen on keeping yourself occupied by asking about my love life, I'm gonna put you to work." Mike snickered and nodded. "Do you have decent handwriting?"

"Eh, you can read it so I guess." Hopper nodded.

"Good enough, come on." he stood up and let Mike out to the front, where Flo was sitting, typing away. "Hey Flo? I'm putting him to work since he's being a nosy turd." Mike grinned at her and she chuckled. "He's got decent handwriting so feel free to let him write stuff."

"Gotcha, Hop. Alrighty, Mr. Wheeler, you see that calendar over there?" she nodded towards the one close to the door. He nodded. "Grab it and come over here." she brought a stool out from under the desk and placed it next to her. He came over with it and set it down on an empty space. She handed him a piece of paper with a bunch of dates on it. "I've been meaning to do this since the first of January but I obviously haven't. I want you to write all those dates down for me, starting with whatever comes after today." Mike nodded and got to work, writing down the little notes and schedules or off days for Hopper.

8. Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

Thoughts? :D

By the time five rolled around, and Hopper emerged from his office, Mike had finished the calendar and was now stapling papers with a look of pure determination on his face. Hopper leaned against the desk and raised an eyebrow at Flo, who chuckled.

"He's a hard worker, I'll tell you that. He's got twice as many papers stapled together in the last hour than I would in three." Hopper snickered. "Thinkin' about keeping him around to help out."

"I will." Mike said, stapling the last two pieces together. He looked at them and shrugged. "If I don't annoy you too much, that is."

"You haven't annoyed me at all, Sweetie." Flo waved her hand at him. "Next time you come in I think I'll have you cleaning." he grinned at her and nodded.

"You got all your stuff packed up, kid?" Hopper asked. Mike nodded and grabbed his book bag from the floor and stood up.

"If you really do need some help, me and the other guys will help. Just let us know." Mike told Flo, who thanked him as they left. As the got in the truck, Hopper looked at Mike, who was looking around outside. He chuckled and started the truck, pulling out of the parking lot.

"What?" Mike asked.

"I don't know, kid. You know, usually a parent, a *father* , of a teenage *girl* , would absolutely hate their boyfriend. Whether there was a good reason or not."

"Oh so you do hate me?" Mike asked, tilting his head to the side in confusion.

"You're supposed to be smart, Wheeler."

"I am! I get all A's, thank you!" Hopper snorted.

"No, I don't hate you, kid. I thought I would because of the way you acted last year-" Mike frowned. "Because you were a little shit then, but I understand it was hard for you. I actually kinda like you, I just mention you and El will stop with whatever tantrum she's having." Mike snorted and rolled his eyes. "Which is why you're coming over to the cabin after school Thursday. By yourself." Mike raised his eyebrows and looked at him.

"I am? Like, you're willingly letting me come over?" Hopper scoffed.

"Jeez, kid, I always willingly let you come over."

"Yeah, but not by myself." Mike retorted.

"Yeah, well, I know that if you two are alone there's no telling what you might get up to." he gave Mike a pointed look, who blushed and stuttered,

"I w-wouldn't- I wouldn't do anything." He looked horrified. "She doesn't even know anything about... that. All she knows is kissing and hand holding. And hugging. I won't be the one to tell her about it, that's for sure. Oh my *God.* " he buried his face in his hands. Hopper couldn't help but laugh at the teen, nudging him in the shoulder.

"I know, kid. I know you wouldn't do anything." Hopper snickered. "I've gotta have Joyce or even your mom talk to El about things, before she starts... you know, *that* time of the month."

"Oh my God."

"Every girl has it Wheeler, better get used to talking about it now."

"*Oh my God.*"

Wednesday, February 13, 1985

"Mike!" Lucas yelled, running up to him at the bike rack. Mike usually reached it first, and the rest came together, but Lucas was by himself.

"Who died?" Mike asked, sitting on his bike. Lucas scowled at him.

"What do I get Max for Valentine's day?" he asked, in an almost whisper.

"Dude." Mike deadpanned, and sighed. "I'm gonna be honest, I'm *not* the person to come to for this kind of thing."

"You know what you're getting El! And you're the only other one who has a girlfriend."

"I don't know what the hell I'm doing, either, dude! She can't even go out on actual dates for a couple more months. And I'm getting her a cat because she wanted a cat."

"So? You still know more than I do." Mike rolled his eyes. "You're getting her flowers and candy too, right?"

"Yeah, but I wouldn't get flowers for Max."

"Why?"

"She doesn't like flowers."

"How do you know?"

"I heard her complaining to Steve about it at Christmas. Pay more attention, dude."

"Fuck." he groaned.

"I guess just take her on a date and give her candy or something? I'd definitely be doing that with El if I could."

"I guess. Can I come over later and ask Nancy for her opinion?" Mike snorted.

"If she's home, yeah. I don't care."

"Cool, cool. Oh! Here they come, act natural!" Lucas immediately leaned against his bike and nearly fell over. Mike face palmed.

"And I thought Dustin was the idiot friend."

"Hey!" Max snickered and shoved Dustin, putting her skateboard down and skating the rest of the way to them.

"Hey Will, did you know that your mom asked Hopper to be her boyfriend?" Mike asked. Will made a face.

"Huh? They're together?" Mike made an *oh shit* face.

"Shit, did you not know?"

"Oooh." the other three giggled. Will grinned.

"Yeah, I knew." Mike let out a breath of relief.

"Why do you keep messing with me, man!" Mike whined.

"He's trying to get you to say fuck." Max said. Mike gave Will the side eye.

"You sneaky little shit." Will grinned and shrugged.

"It's fun to mess with you." Mike pouted and crossed his arms. "I'm sorry."

"No you're not."

"You're right, I'm not."

Thursday, February 14, 1985

"I want you to come home right after school, Michael!" Karen told him over the phone.

"What? Why? I'm going over to El's!" he complained.

"I want to drive you, because it's so cold. And I'm making you, her and Hop a lasagna. Plus I'm not about to let you attempt to ride your bike all the way out there with a *kitten.* "

"Oh. Right, I forgot about that."

"Yeah, so you won't have to wait very long to see your girlfriend." she

cooed.

"Mom!" he groaned and saw Joyce and Will grinning at each other. He gave them a glare and they started laughing. "Ugh, I've gotta go, I'll see you later." he grumbled.

"Okay, I love you."

"Love you too." he hung up and trudged back to his seat at the table.

"So, what are your plans for tonight?" Will asked, waiting for Mike to look up at him. He did, and Will continued, "Since you'll be *all alone* with *El,* your *girlfriend* for four *whole hours* ?" Mike stared at him for a solid three minutes, before responding.

"You, Will Byers, are a little shit and you're not getting any closer to me saying the F word out of annoyance."

"William!" Joyce gasped dramatically, and Will snickered.

"Okay, I'm just glad you're not mad at me for calling him a little shit." Mike said, chuckling. Joyce smiled.

"I'm not mad because you're right, he is a little shit when he wants to be. So he's been trying to get you to say the F word, huh? Why, may I ask?"

"I don't know!" Mike exclaimed, mouthful of eggs, and she laughed. "I'm pretty sure he's trying to annoy it out of me for the hell of it." Will snickered and shrugged innocently.

"It's fun getting you all riled up. Ask the others." Will eyes widened a bit as if he spilled a secret. And he did. Mike eyed him, and let out a small chuckled.

"I get it now." he sing-songed. "It's not gonna work anymore, Byers. You've gotta try a lot harder than that." Joyce smiled at him and with a shake of her head, patted the top of Will's head.

"I fear for your nerves, Mike." he let out a sigh.

"Same."

The school day went by pretty well, other than his friends trying to get on his nerves, but he didn't let it get to him, not giving them the satisfaction.

"Did you ever figure out what you're doing for Max?" Mike asked as Lucas strutted towards him. "And what's with the walk, dude? You look like you're doing a fancier version of the chicken dance." Lucas flipped him off, but nodded.

"Yeah, I'm gonna take her to Benny's old restaurant. His brother owns it now, he kept the name." Mike nodded, he'd heard Hopper talking about that.

"Yeah, I'm glad he did. Is that all you're doing?" he asked.

"We're gonna go see a movie, I think. If she wants to, at least. I took your advice and *didn't* get her flowers, and gave her chocolate and a skateboarding teddy bear." Mike snorted. "She ate all the chocolate in first period."

"Figures." he said. "And where the hell did you find a skateboarding teddy bear?"

"Walmart. There are strange things in there." Mike snorted again and nodded in agreement.

"So, Wheeler, what exactly are your intentions with El tonight?" Max asked, skating up to the two of them, Dustin and Will a few feet behind her. Mike rolled his eyes.

"Not much, ya know? We're getting her a cat, which we're gonna pick up on the way, and eat the lasagna my mom's made for me, her and Hopper."

"Dude, sucks to suck." Dustin said, clapping him on the back. Mike raised an eyebrow at him, confused. "You've gotta have a Valentine's date with the Chief, you dip."

"Mike's gonna be alone with El for *four* whole hours, guys." Will said, wiggling his eyebrows. Dustin choked on his spit and Max and Lucas gasped, before laughing.

"You know for a fact that we're not gonna do anything." Mike said, shrugging. "I don't *care* about that. I just like being with her. Besides, we're only *thirteen* ."

"Ugh, don't get all sappy on us, Wheeler. You better go get her cat." Lucas snorted so hard it had to hurt and Mike rolled his eyes at him.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, *Lukey*. " Mike was on his bike and peddling away before Lucas had a chance to react, laughing his ass off.

Before he went home, though, he stopped by the florist to buy flowers for not only El, but his mom and sisters. He knew his mom *loved* roses, so he figured he'd get the three of them a single pink rose each and a bouquet of red for El (he also had a bouquet sent to his mom this morning, but only he and the florist new that). And that's what he did, and stopped by Melvald's to get Holly some chocolate, knowing she wouldn't really care for the rose. It's the thought that counts, though.

Karen didn't expect to get anything for Valentine's day, but there was a bouquet of red roses on her doorstep this morning, after the kids were gone to school and Holly up in her room. It didn't say who it was from, but it still put a smile on her face.

And when her son brought home a pink rose for not only her, but his sisters too- along with chocolate- she felt like her heart would burst.

"Thank you, Mike. I love it." she said, squeezing him so tight the two heard his bones crack. He chuckled.

"Jeez, mom." she let him go and grinned at him, before calling up the stairs for Nancy- who had arrived about twenty minutes before Mike- and Holly to come down. Holly practically bounded down the stairs, and was immediately curious as to why Mike held his hands behind his back. He kept spinning as she followed him, trying to get a glimpse, but it didn't work. "I'll show you in a second, Hols." he chuckled. She pouted but nodded. Nancy finally came down, half of her hair pinned up- in a way that made Mike think of the Grinch- with the rest down and curled. He bit back a grin when he saw her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Mike wanted to give you two something." she said. "But wait a second, okay?" she told Mike, who raised an eyebrow and nodded. She came back with the camera and he let out a groan. "What? This is worth documenting!" she said, holding it up. "Okay now do it." Mike rolled his eyes but held out the two roses to them, and Karen snapped a picture that would end up on the mantel for years to come. A grin spread across Holly's face as she realized what it was, and Nancy's shocked smile, her eyes crinkling on the outside corners, and Mike's smile that could light up the whole room- at their reactions. Karen wished someone had been there to get *her* reaction, but she hoped there would be a next time. And there would be. She got a picture of Holly and Nancy both in the middle of pouncing on Mike, and the third where they were hugging, and she couldn't help the tears or the smile on her face.

“At least *someone* in this family is sweet and make you feel *loved* .” Karen said loudly, staring at Ted, who just waved a hand at her. She flipped him off.

“Fuck you, dad.” Nancy said, “Thank you for the rose, Mike, I love it.” he gave her a smile and she turned on her heel.

“Language! You’re grounded!” Ted yelled.

“No she’s not, shut up.” Mike rolled his eyes.

“You’re grounded too.” Ted huffed.

“Like you’re gonna come up with any kind of punishment, asshole.” he heard Ted mutter something but didn’t understand him, deciding to ignore it and go upstairs to get ready. Karen turned to her husband.

“You better prepare yourself, Ted.” she hissed. “You’re gonna have the fight of a lifetime as soon as they leave.”

"You know all the rules Hopper's given you, right, Michael?" Karen said as she slowed to a stop. They dropped Holly’s off at a friends

house on the way, and Nancy had already left with Jonathan. Mike let out the most teenager-ish sigh yet.

"Yes, mom." he let out a small chuckle, picking the kitten up with one hand and cuddling her to his cheek. "We're probably just gonna stare at her for the next four hours and eat lasagna." Karen gave him a look, which he did back to her and she laughed.

"Quick question." she said as he got out of the car.

"Hm?"

"How do you expect to carry the food, the bag, flowers, the cat *and* try not to spoil the surprise?"

"Shit."

After a couple minutes, the kitten basically decided for him and wiggled her way down into his coat pocket, which had more than enough space for her. Mike looked at his mom and the two laughed. He kissed her cheek.

"I'll see you later, mom, love you!" he called as he walked away, down the now familiar trail.

"Love you too!"

It took a little longer to get there, as he was trying not to drop anything or jostle the kitten too much, but he eventually did, and if he hadn't been carrying so much stuff, she'd have tackled him. Which she basically did once his arms were free. He chuckled and hugged her back just as tight. When she finally let him go, he gave her the flowers with a shy smile. Her eyes lit up even more- if that was possible- and she kissed him on the cheek before rushing off to put them in water.

"I have a surprise for you." he told her, leading her to the couch once she finished her task. He gently pushed her shoulders and she plopped down, looking up at him. "Do you have your blindfold?" she raised her eyebrows and nodded, taking it out of her pocket. He chuckled, of course it was literally *on* her being. "Can you put it on just for a minute or so? I have to set up a little bit of stuff and I'll let

you know when to take it off." she nodded and gave him a bright smile, before tying it around her head.

He made sure she couldn't actually see and went on to set up some of the stuff he'd brought in the bag. Cat toys, food and water bowl, and actual cat food. He almost freaked out for a second, thinking he forgot about the litter box and litter, but then remembered that Hopper hid it outside the cabin somewhere, under a black tarp where he kept fire wood. He made a mental note to go get it before she pissed and shit everywhere, because he did *not* wanna clean it up. The kitten let out a tiny meow, as if sensing it.

"Shhh!" he shushed her, picking her up gently and holding her up to his face. She licked his nose and he made a face. He put her on the floor for a second, and shrugged his jacket off, before picking her back up and making his way over to El. He sat next to her, and nudged her. She grinned. "Okay, you can take it off."

"Who were you shushing just now?" she asked as she pulled it off, and her eyes nearly popped out of her head when she saw the fluffy white cotton ball in his hands. Only it wasn't a cotton ball. It was a *kitten* . The look on her face almost made Mike regret the decision, but then she grinned. "Is it mine?" she whispered, as if someone would come and take the kitten. He nodded. "Really?"

"She sure is. Here." he held her out to him and El took her, holding her with both hands as she held her up to her face, nuzzling her with her cheek.

"She's so soft. And pretty." she said, looking at him. He grinned. "You got her for me?"

"It's your Valentine's day present." he told her. She leaned over and kissed him unexpectedly, and he almost forgot to kiss back. She pulled away almost as quick as she leaned in, and stood up.

"I'll be back." she told him, almost running to her room, still holding the kitten. He chuckled, leaning back on the cushions. She came back with the kitten perched on her shoulder, looking down at him. He couldn't help but laugh at that.

"I see you're a pirate, now, huh? You've got a parrot and *everything.* " she giggled,

“Arrr!” she mocked, bending her index finger as if it was a hook. He beamed at her. She smiled and handed him a small, wrapped box that had an envelope on the top. She sat back down and the kitten plopped down on her legs and curled up.

"Open the box first. Then the envelope right after, no questions." she told him. He laughed nodded and did as she asked. There was a tape sitting in the box, and he raised an eyebrow, but opened the envelope. Inside it, was a bright and colorful drawing, a pretty *good* drawing, of what looked like the two of them standing outside, the sunset behind them. "Will drew it for me. I drew the trees though, and colored everything in." he smiled at her, and then read the writing in the top left corner.

Jonathan helped me make you a mixed tape. It had some of your favorite songs, and songs I like that remind me of you. I hope you like it. Love, El

He smiled at her.

"I can't wait to listen to it." she smiled happily, and he pecked her on the cheek. His stomach rumbled, loudly, and she made a face.

"Hungry?" she asked, eyebrow raised.

"Uh, a little bit."

"Snack? Or lasagna?" she asked.

"Snack for now." he told her. She nodded and stood up, putting the kitten in her place and petting her head, before hauling Mike up and pulling him to the kitchen with her.

"Do you want eggos?" she asked. He grinned and nodded, and she went to the freezer and pulled out the box. She froze for a second, and then shut it, looking at Mike. "Does she have a name?" he shook his head.

"She's all yours, El, you can name her."

"Eggo?" she asked. He chuckled.

"If that's what you want, of course." she grinned.

"Her name is Eggo."

They snacked on eggos and played with Eggo- Mike did eventually go and get the litter box and cat litter, filling it up just in time for the tiny kitten to use the bathroom. About thirty minutes after five, Hopper came up, so El unlocked the door for him. The teens looked at him expectantly, eyebrows raised when they saw him all dressed up in dress pants, a red dress shirt and black tie.

“Looking great, Hop.” Mike teased.

“Really? Is this okay to wear?” he asked nervously. Mike blinked.

“Is that why you’re here?” El asked. Hopper nodded. “You look great. Now go on your date, dad.”

“Okay, okay, I wanted you two’s thoughts. I’ll be back in a couple hours. Behave!” he left immediately after. The young couple looked at each other, shock written all over their faces, and burst into laughter.

“I figured you’d rather watch an action movie than romance and the only thing I think you’d like is *My Lucky Stars* .” Lucas said nervously, looking at his girlfriend who was stuffing her face with chocolate. She looked up at him from across the booth.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, that’s cool. I love Jackie Chan.” she said. “Sorry, this chocolate is really good.” she said sheepishly. He laughed.

“I understand, it’s my favorite.” he told her. She offered him a piece. “No, it’s yours.” he waved her off. She threw it at him instead and gave him a smug look when it stuck to his face, having melted between her fingers. “Gross.”

“Yet you still eat it.” she raised her brows at him as he popped the chocolate in his mouth, wiping his face with a napkin. He shrugged.

“Never let chocolate go to waste, Max.” he wiggled his eyebrows at her and she rolled her eyes, snorting.

“You’re ridiculous, Stalker.” he grinned at her.

“But I’m your ridicule-er?”

“That makes zero sense.” she laughed. He grinned again.

“Oh well. We should probably get going if we want to make it on time.” she nodded. They cleaned up their table and she packed up the rest of her chocolate to eat on the way there, and left.

“Call me crazy-” Hopper started, but Joyce interrupted him, giggling.

“You’re crazy.” he threw a balled up napkin at her.

“But you know how we got… you know, money?” he mouthed the last part and she nodded. “We should buy a house.” she raised an eyebrow at him.

“A house?”

“A house.” he confirmed. “I *know* it sounds crazy, but I’ve been thinking about it for a while. Look, your roof has started leaking, and despite how many times it’s been fixed, it always comes back.”

“Good point, but I don't know if that’s a good reason-”

“Hear me out.” he said. “I want to get El out of that cabin. She claims she loves it, and I think she does, but she doesn’t need to grow up there. There isn’t enough room as it is, and you know that once the older Wheeler gets her hands on El, she’ll buy her thousands of dollars worth of clothes and we have no where to put it.”

“I suppose we could find a house to fit us and the kids…” Joyce put her chin in her hand.

“I know we haven’t been together long, Joy, but we were together in high school- who’s to say we wouldn’t have been voted as most likely to break up and get back together in fifteen years?”

“We *were* voted as that, Jim.” she chuckled. “More like thirty, though.”

“It is thirty.” he grinned sheepishly. “God, we’re old.”

“Says you! I am *not* old!” she threw the napkin back at him, bouncing it off his nose and into the empty bowl in front of him. He just laughed. “I’ll think about it, though. I like the idea.”

“That’s all I can ask of you.”

“Theodore Wheeler, I just want you to know that you are *the* biggest piece of shit on this earth.” Karen growled as she stormed into the house.

“Whatever Karen, I don’t *care* .”

“I know you don’t! You don’t care about me, about your children. You kicked your son's puppy for crying out loud!”

“He threw a glass of water at me!” Ted retorted.

“BECAUSE YOU KICKED THE DAMN DOG, TED! What don’t you understand? Why don’t you love us? Or at least *act* like it?”

“I do-”

“Don’t you dare say you love us. If you did you wouldn’t ignore your children, talk to your son the way that you do.”

“He isn’t the son I wanted.” Ted replied, standing up from his chair.

“Excuse me? He’s the only son you’re gonna get! He’s perfect the way he is, Ted!” he muttered under his breath. “Excuse me?”

“None of your business.” he hissed. She picked up a plastic cup and threw it at him. It his his shoulder.

“Damn right it is my business. What’s yours is mine, Ted! Remember our wedding vows? What’s yours is mine, what’s mine is yours! So spill, give me every detail of what the fuck you just mumbled under

your goddamn breath!"

"I said he isn't the only son." he told her, leaning against the counter. She stared at him. "He is, in fact, the worst out of the three. He's worthless, Karen, I don't see how you don't see it-" she slapped him *hard* across the face.

"Get the fuck out." she hissed.

"This is MY HOU-"

"I DON'T GIVE TWO FUCKS WHOSE HOUSE IT IS, TED. GET THE FUCK OUT BEFORE I BURN IT ALL TO THE GROUND WITH YOU IN IT!" she threw the nearest thing at him- a wine glass. It hit him then the floor, shattering. He practically ran from her, up the stairs. She followed after him. "You sorry, no good, worthless piece of shit! How *dare* you call my son worthless! If anyone here is worthless, it's you. You lying, cheating bastard! Get out! Get out!" she yelled. "I hate you. The only good thing I ever got out of you were my children. Get the fuck out!"

"Don't you dare think you're gonna get anything out of me." Ted yelled, throwing clothes into a bag. "I'm the one who provides around here! You're gonna lose everything, Karen, and that's a promise."

"That's where you're fucking wrong, Ted. And you know it. I can ruin you, and you damn well better know that's exactly what I'm gonna do." she tore their wedding pictures off the wall, throwing them in his direction, not caring where they went or if they shattered. "Eighteen years wasted! Was I not good enough for you? I regret ever meeting you, you sorry fucking piece of *shit!* "

"Fuck you Karen." he grumbled, storming out of the room.

"No, fuck *you* , Ted. I hope your mother's proud of the piece of shit you've become." she hissed as he turned around in the doorway of he house. Before he could say a word, she slammed the door in his face.

"I need my keys!" he yelled.

"I don't fucking care! Walk! Find a payphone to call your fucking

whore to pick you up!" he banged on the door for a couple minutes, but she couldn't be bothered, grabbing a wine bottle out of the fridge and drinking it right out the bottle. She gave it twenty minutes before looking outside to make sure he was gone. The sun was setting, getting darker by the minute. She took another drink out of the bottle and made her way down to the basement, grabbing an empty clothes basket and taking it back up to *her* room.

She threw every single article of clothing Ted had out into the front yard, every picture of him or one with him in it. The only one she kept was their family photo, taking it out of the frame and ripping him out of it completely, placing it back in it' original place and throwing the piece of the picture out with the rest of them. She'd drank half the bottle by the time she was done, sweaty and out of breath despite the cold air outside.

It took her a few minutes to realize she was crying- and bleeding.

"Dammit." she swore, standing up shakily as she held her bloody hand up to her chest. She'd cut it on a picture frame, she assumed. She tossed the wine bottle in the pile of *trash* and walked into the house

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

> I apologize for the long wait, there's been lot's going on. So, a few things;
>
> We only have a few chapters of this left- I know, I know, y'all are just like what the actual flying fuck B, but hear me out.
>
> Only a few more chapters- no more than five I know that much- BUT, I've decided that I'm gonna turn Home into a series (HR is technically the first story in the series, since I've redone Home). Not sure how many parts will be in the series, just know that it'll eventually end in marriages and most likely kids ;D
>
> Hope you guys like this chapter!

Karen didn't even attempt to explain to her children what happened while they were gone, she sat in her bathtub filled with bubbles even when they knocked on the door. She didn't want to break their hearts into a billion pieces as hers had been. This pissed the two Wheeler children off, knowing something *bad* had happened, considering the house was trashed and all of Ted's stuff was in the front yard.

The only thing she said was to Nancy, and that was asking if she'd go and pick Holly up because she'd been drinking. That pissed Mike off even more and he went down to the basement and ranted to El, not even caring about how late it was by the time the two went to bed. It's not like he'd have a restful sleep anyways.

Friday, February 15, 1985

Mike didn't sleep a bit the night before, worrying about his mom- and of course, the nightmares- so he was a little more than an asshole and

a half throughout the day. He swore in Mr. Clarke's class- the last class of the day- when he kept dropping a *cotton ball* they had to use in an experiment so Mr. Clarke made him sit out- not because he was mad but he could tell the boy was more than just frustrated with a cotton ball. He asked him to stay for a few minutes when the bell rang. Mike took his time packing his bag.

"Mike," he started, sitting in the desk next to Mike, "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to be honest with me."

"I'm not in trouble am I?" Mike asked, chewing on his bottom lip.

"No, no, not at all. Are things okay at home? Or is there anything going on that I should know about or you need help with? I've noticed how different you've been lately, Mike. I just want to make sure you're okay." Mike hesitated for a couple seconds, and sighed, rubbing at his eyes.

"I honestly don't know," he said, finally. "Something's going on with my parents, my dad left last night and my mom threw all his things outside but she won't tell us what's going on. And with other things? You wouldn't be able to help. I can't tell you why because I promised I wouldn't tell anyone else and it's not like you'd believe me anyways." Mike ranted, hardly taking a breath. "I can't freaking sleep at night, I have these- these nightmares and I-I don't know how to stop them? Talking about them will make me seem absolutely insane. On top of all that, my dad literally hates me, why? I don't know. He kicked our puppy and got mad when I threw a cup of water at him." Mike huffed and didn't say anything else, looking down at his feet.

"Oh, well… Mike, you can always, *always* talk to me. If you ever want to talk or tell me anything, it will not leave this room or my mouth." Mike's eyes flickered to Mr. Clarke's face. "And as for the stuff with your parents, I don't… I don't really know what to tell you. I'm sure your mom will tell you what's going on soon. Does she usually tell you guys things?" Mike scoffed.

"No, we either hear it ourselves when they fight or when she's wine drunk and telling her friends on the phone."

"Oh, well. Maybe whatever happened was bad enough that she

doesn't want to talk about it at all. Do you *want* to talk about those nightmares?" Mike shook his head. "Well, you don't have to. Not until you're ready, that is. And I don't think your dad hates you. He's troubled- or really messed up in the head if he acts like he does."

"He wouldn't go to a football game with me last year." Mike told him. "He loves football and I hate it, but I tried to get him to spend time with me, you know? But he'd rather sleep in his Lay-Z-Boy. I asked Chief Hopper if he wanted to go with me but he decided that he wanted to do what *I* wanted, so that *I* could have fun."

"Chief Hopper?" Mr. Clarke asked, eyebrows raised.

"It's a long… long story." Mike sighed. "But anyways, the Chief of police is more like a father to me than my own, and I haven't even *really* known the man that long. Does that sound normal to you?"

"Honestly? No. But really, you kids aren't normal." Mr. Clarke said. Mike made a face. "And it's not a bad thing, don't get me wrong. Nothing about this town is normal if you ask me. I mean, what with Will going missing and having a funeral for him and then he's saved? And Dustin asking me about the salt and all, then what happened at the school. It's weird." Mike chuckled a little, going just slightly paler.

"You're telling me."

Tuesday, February 19, 1985

Over the next few days, Mr. Clarke watched as Mike seemed to grow angrier and angrier, eyes darker and darker with exhaustion. While he was writing notes on the board, he noticed Mike fall asleep with his chin in his hand. He sighed and looked at Dustin, who was seated next to Mike and looking at him, worried.

"Dustin, will you come here please?" he asked. Dustin nodded and stood up. He sort of jostled Mike and he started, rubbing at his eyes and writing the notes down quickly.

"What's up?" Dustin asked.

"Will you take Mike to the nurses office? And make sure he goes there?"

"Uh, sure." he walked over to Mike and whispered to him. Mr. Clarke could've sworn he saw Mike roll his eyes, but ignored it. He wrote a note and handed it to Dustin and clapped Mike on the back as he walked by him. He went back to writing notes, deciding to make a call after class.

He leaned back in his chair as the phone rang, only ringing a couple of times before Karen answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Wheeler?"

"Yes."

"This is Mr. Clarke, I'm Mike's science teacher."

"Yes, I remember you. Is he in trouble?"

"No, no. I just want to speak to you about him."

"Okay, what's wrong?" Mr. Clarke could hear something different in her voice. Other times they'd talked, whether by phone or in person, she sounded so sure of herself, confident. But now? Not even close.

"Mike has been… different. He's angry, and has trouble focusing in class."

"I thought he wasn't in trouble?"

"He's not, I'm just worried about him. I asked him a few days ago if there was anything going on at home and he said he didn't know. He just knows something is wrong, and that you're not telling them anything." he expected her to get angry with him, but instead, she just sighed and said,

"Is there anyway I can come up to the school one day and we'll talk?"

Thursday, February 21, 1985

"Michael Wheeler, please come to the front office. Michael Wheeler to the front office." Mike jolted slightly when he heard his name and Max snickered. He glared at her and glanced at the clock.

"You can take your things, there's only a few minutes of class left." Ms. Toney said. He nodded and packed up his stuff and made his way to the office. He was surprised to see his mom and sisters waiting for him with Mr. Clarke.

"Who died?" he asked.

"No one," Karen chuckled, "Just thought I'd bring you guys some Burger King." she held up two bags. Mike raised an eyebrow and looked at Nancy, who shrugged.

"Okay… but why is Nancy here?"

"It's lunch time right now, so I decided to come hang out with you and your little nerds." she replied. He rolled his eyes.

"Hey Mikey!" Holly cheered, just realizing he'd walked in. She hugged his legs and he chuckled, patting the top of her head.

"Why don't you three head on to the lunch room? Me and your mom have a few things to discuss."

"And no, you're not in trouble, Mike. It's school related." Karen lied. She didn't want to, but her son was a stubborn little shit sometimes.

"Okay…? Well, come on, Holly. Wanna see the place you're gonna go to school in like ten years?" he asked. She nodded and raised her arms up. He managed to *not* roll his eyes and picked her up anyways. Nancy took the food and the two made their way towards the cafeteria. The bell had rung while Mike was on his way to the office, so most students were in the cafeteria already, and stared at Nancy as Mike led her to the Party's table.

"To what do we owe the pleasure?" Dustin asked, grinning at Nancy.

"Oh, shut it." she rolled her eyes, sitting next to Max. Mike put Holly

on the seat next to Nancy and sat down. "Shit, I forgot her juice. I'll be right back." she said, and rushed out the door.

"She's gonna go snoop." Mike said.

"Snoop on what?"

"Mom and Mr. Clarke." he replied, reaching into the bag and grabbing Holly's chicken nuggets and fries for her. She grinned up at her and he smiled back. "They're having a *discussion*."
Karen and Mr. Clarke were sitting in one of the smaller meeting rooms, across from each other.

"Ted… he's never been a good father to them, not really. He changed a few diapers here and there, never helped with Holly. Mike knew how to change a diaper by the time she was a month old, and always helped me. The last couple of years have been… bad. Ted has been getting on Mike for the smallest things, being an all around dick, you know?" Mr. Clarke nodded. "And last week, on Valentines day… the kids were out and we had a huge fight, one that's ended out marriage."

"If you don't mind me asking, what happened?"

"I don't mind. I've been keeping it in, haven't told anyone, not even my mom. I get my gossiping from her, and I know you wouldn't tell anyone. But… Ted has been cheating. For a while now."

"Oh."

"And that's not even the worst of it." She ran a hand through her hair. "He's got other kids. I don't know how many or how old, but… He said that Mike isn't the only son. That he's the worst out of the three, and that he's worthless. That's when I started screaming and throwing stuff at him, to get him to leave. How could someone call their child worthless?" she looked close to tears. "That's why I haven't told them anything. I don't want them to feel the heartbreak and anger I feel. Mike hates his dad, I know he does, but to know that his dad thinks he's worthless? He's just a kid, he shouldn't have that kind of thing said to or about him."

"Karen, this is all horrible, and I'm so sorry. I really am." Mr. Clarke said, giving her a sympathetic look. "Ted is a grade A dick, I agree. But I think you should tell them. Maybe not *everything* but they deserve to know. Not telling them will only make them angrier and angrier. And Mike is what, going on fourteen soon?" Karen nodded. "He's growing up, and he's gonna find out one way or another. Nancy too."

"I know, but I'm scared of Mike's reaction the most. He's changed so much in the last year or so, I don't know why or what happened for him to be like this." And she really didn't. She knew everything that happened, but El's back and they're happy together, so what's wrong with him?

"Maybe you could take him to… a therapist? Or I can have the guidance counselor talk to him every once in a while."

"I don't know, I think that would make him even angrier." There was a slight knock on the door and Karen jumped, and Nancy poked her head in, eyes red and watery. She walked in all the way, holding Holly's juice so tight even she was surprised it hadn't exploded everywhere.

"If you don't tell him when he gets home from school, I will, mom." she said quietly. "How could you keep something like this from us?"

"I'm so sorry, baby, I am. I wish I didn't have to tell you at all, that he hasn't done this. I didn't know what else to do, I didn't want you guys to hurt."

"The only one that'll really be hurt here is you, mom. Mike hates dad, hell, I hate him now! Holly doesn't understand what's going on. It really sucks, and yeah it hurts that he loves these other kids more, but if that's what it takes, I'm glad he's gone. He's always been horrible to us."

"I know, and I'm sorry. If I had known sooner I'd have gotten you out of there a long time ago. I promise you. And I promise I'll tell Mike later."

When Nancy went back to the lunchroom, her eyes had cleared up

but, apparently she looked like;

"You look like you've seen a ghost." Max said. "The hell happened on your way to the office?"

"I saw some little twelve year olds making out. Or *trying* to, at least."

Karen tried to keep herself busy while she waited for Mike, baking his favorite cookies and deciding to make his favorite dinner- no matter how this goes. She jumped when the door opened and he yelled,

"I'm home!"

She let out a deep breath and called,

"Mike! Come here please!" she heard his bag hit the ground and his footsteps as he trudged into the kitchen.

"Hey." he greeted.

"Hey Sweetie. Can you sit with me for a few minutes?"

"Yeah, but I'm going to El's, remember? Hop's got her some books to study and I'm gonna help her some stuff."

"It won't take long." he nodded. She took another deep breath and he eyed her, and she started. She told him more than she'd told Mr. Clarke- leaving out the worthless part, of course. Mike just stared at her the whole time.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, Mike. I just… I know your father never really loved me, but like the stupid, young girl I was, I thought he did back then and I just made myself believe it all these years."

"You're not… you're not stupid, mom." Mike said softly. He sighed. "If anyone's stupid here, it's him. I don't understand why or how he couldn't love you. Me? I understand. I'm a nerd and not a football star- as if I'd be old enough to *be* one anyways- so of course he doesn't love me. I've known that for a while."

"Mike, I'm sure he loves you deep down. I don't want you to think that."

"Then why has he treated me the way he does?" he actually looked close to tears. "I don't love him so it doesn't matter. I'm fine with it and I'm glad he's gone. I'd better go, though, mom. Thanks for telling me." he stood up and kissed her cheek and all but ran out of the kitchen. Karen sighed and buried her face in her hands.

Mike was sort of… sad, to know that El wasn't at the cabin when he got there- he'd forgotten they had a set time and that she was at the Byers with Joyce- who was teaching her… things, for another fifteen minutes.

He began debating in his head whether to knock on the door- Hopper was home- or just sit on the porch and wait for his girlfriend. The former was- technically not- chosen, when Hopper walked out on the porch, almost jumping out of his boots when he saw Mike just standing there.

"What are you doing here so early, kid? You know she's got another fifteen minutes, right?" Hopper raised his eyebrows at him.

"Yeah, yeah… I uh, I know." Mike nodded.

"What's wrong?"

"Noth-nothing. Why would you think somethings wrong?"

"Look kid, I may be getting old and my eyes are slowly dying on me, but I ain't blind and I ain't stupid. I can see somethings up." Mike shrugged. "Come on in. We're gonna talk." Mike sighed and followed the Chief, plopping down on the couch. Hopper sat across from him in an armchair. "Alright, tell me what's going on. And don't tell me nothing, I already told you I can see something *is* wrong." Mike huffed and crossed his arms.

"My dad cheated on my mom and has at least two other kids- sons- who are better than me and he'd rather be with them than us." Mike shrugged. Hopper stared at him for a couple seconds.

"...What?" He said, finally. Mike nodded.

"Yep."

"Ted Wheeler… was able to get *another* woman?"

"I really hope there isn't a double meaning to that about my mom, because if so, I'll punch you again."

"No, kid." he shook his head. "I just… I never expected the dick to ever even get married when we were younger, and no offense but I know the main reason your mom married him was for money."

"I mean… yeah, but she told me that when she was younger she actually thought he loved her. If he was anything like he is today I don't see how she felt like that, but…" he shrugged.

"Damn, I'm sorry, kid." Hopper said, patting his shoulder. "You kids don't deserve him." Mike just shrugged. "Uh, when did you find out about this?"

"Fifteen minutes ago."

"So it hasn't really sunk in, yet, huh?"

"Nope."

"You think you'll cry or punch something again? *Me* again?"

"I don't know." Mike shrugged.

It wasn't long after that, El and Joyce arrived, El immediately- of course- going to Mike and hugging him tight.

"You're sad." she told him.

"Um…"

"And mad?" she asked.

"Yeah, uh, just my dad again." Mike told her. "He's not important right now, let's work on your school and then I'll tell you, okay?"

"Promise?"
"Promise."
Mike did eventually tell her that night, with probably the least amount of emotion her or Hopper have ever heard from him. El immediately wanted to find the disgusting man and beat his ass, but the two just barely convinced her not to. She held onto Mike's hand until it was time for him to go home- whereas Hopper took him home and she rode with them.

Monday, February 25, 1985

It took about three whole days for it to really sink in for Mike. Over the weekend, his mom had been trying to talk to him and Nancy a lot more about what was going on in their lives, and for the most part, Nancy told her. Mike didn't exactly have that much of a life outside of school and the usual gatherings with the Party, so he didn't know what she expected him to tell her.

As it turns out, Nancy wasn't the only one who heard the conversation between Karen and Mr. Clarke- *Stacy* did too- and by Monday morning, everyone in the school- and probably the whole damn town- knew about the Wheeler's. Which also meant Troy and James knew, and the two assholes waited for Mike outside after school. Mike heard people whispering and looking at him all day- making sure to keep his head down in class and write notes to distract himself. It didn't stop people from asking questions and being assholes about it, so, he was very much annoyed and ready to murder someone by the end of the day.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me." Mike grumbled as he and the Party walked towards their bikes.

"Well, well, well, if it's isn't the freaks of Hawkins." Troy started off. "You four have a free pass today, but Frog Face here? Boy do I have some words for you."

"You might wanna back the fuck off, Troy." Mike hissed, yanking his bike out of the rack.

"Just gonna call me by my name? Not some bad word?" he said in a

baby voice.

"Why should I waste my time coming up for some new dumb fucking name for you when it's already there for me to call you?"

"Damn, daddy issues got your panties in a twist, don't they?" Troy glared and James snickered. "I don't blame the old fuck for leaving- with that family of yours. Worthless little Frog Face, Nancy the Slut-"

"Troy, I swear to God." Lucas stepped forward but Dustin held him back.

"That wino of a mom and that stupid little-" Troy couldn't even finish his sentence, Mike stepped forward and punched the *hell* out of Troy, blood *squirting* out of his- probable- broken nose. It happened so fast the Party couldn't stop him. Not like they'd have wanted to, anyways.

"Holy shit!" Dustin shrieked, slapping a hand over his mouth.

Mike picked up his bike, got on it and took off without a word.

"I'm gonna get you for this!" Troy yelled. Mike just flipped him off. The others got on their bikes and tried to catch up with Mike, but by the time they passed the high school, there was no sign of him.

"We need to tell Nancy." Will said, pointing at where she, his brother and Steve were walking out of the school. They nodded in agreement and Dustin took off into the parking lot, screaming,

"STEVE! STEVE!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Jesus Christ, where's the fire?" Steve asked.

"I don't know but a lot of shit just went down-"

"Where's my brother?" Nancy interrupted.

"-with Mike and Troy." Dustin finished. The others caught up with him and started trying to tell them what happened.

"Alright, alright, one at a time!" Steve said, holding his hands up. "Max, what happened?"

"Everyone at school has been whispering about Mike and looking at him and asking him questions." she said. "And Troy and James were waiting outside for him after school and Troy started insulting Mike and saying he didn't blame Mike's dad for leaving- which we didn't even know about- and started insulting him, you, his mom *and* Holly. Mike punched the shit out of Troy and broke his nose- blood squirted everywhere."

"It looked like something out of a movie." Dustin added.

"Where'd Mike go?" Jonathan asked. They shrugged.

"He went that way." Lucas pointed in the direction he went.

"Wait, he didn't tell you guys what happened?" Nancy asked. They shook their heads.

"I'm gonna go get my car." Jonathan said. Steve nodded in agreement and the two went to get their cars.

"Dad's been cheating on mom." Nancy said. "Has at least two other kids, both boys. They had a huge fight on Valentines day and mom found out and kicked him out."

"Holy shit." Lucas said. "I was wondering what all that shit in the yard was."

"That's what mom and Mr. Clarke were talking about and I heard them, then mom told Mike after school."

"Where do you think he went?" Max asked.

"Either to the cabin, his house or the Byers." Lucas told her.

"Well, let's split up and go look." Nancy said as the two cars rolled up behind them. "Will, Lucas, with me and Jon, you two go with Steve." Lucas looked like he wanted to argue but did as he was told, saluting the rest of the group and getting into the car.

"Fuckin' nerd." Max huffed, getting in the car.

"Yet you're dating him." Dustin told her, getting in the back. He

already knew there was no arguing with her about that.

"Hey, Mr. Wheeler, it's been a few days!" Flo greeted, having glanced up at him when he walked in. She looked up at him when he didn't reply and gasped. "What happened to you?" she demanded, standing up and rounding the desk. "Hopper!" she yelled.

"What!" he yelled back.

"We have a bit of a situation here!"

Mike could faintly hear Hopper grumbling as he made his way towards the front, immediately going silent when he saw Mike.

"Did it sink in?" he asked hesitantly.

"It sank in." Mike croaked.

The boy had bloody fists and blood shot eyes, a bit of blood smeared on his face.

"Come on. I've got him, Flo." Hopper nudged the boy into his office and sat him down, grabbing a first aid kit on the way. He crouched in front of him. "Hold out your hands, palms down." Mike did so. "Wanna tell me what happened?"

"Not really."

"Gonna tell me anyway?" Hopper gave him a look and Mike let out a small huff.

"Everyone at school knows. Don't know how. Kept talking about it, asking me questions."

"This is gonna sting." Hopper warned as he cleaned the small cuts and scratches on the boys knuckles. Mike hissed a little but otherwise didn't move or make a sound.

"Troy and James were waiting outside after school. Troy started talking shit and called Nancy a slut and my mom a wino and he started to call Holly stupid but I punched him."

"This isn't how… this happened, is it?" Hopper gestured towards his hands. Mike shook his head.

"A lot of blood came out of his nose so I think it's broken, but I don't care. I left after that and went in the woods."

"And what happened in the woods?"

"A tree." he replied. Hopper wrapped bandages around his hands carefully.

"A tree happened?"

"I punched it. A lot. And the ground. And screamed."

"No wonder it sounds like you lost your voice." Mike shrugged. Hopper finished with his other hand and stood, placing the kit on his desk. "Come on, let's get you home, kid."

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

> I have watched Season 3 all the way through and... yeah. In a couple weeks when more of you have watched Ill give my thoughts on it! It was definitely an amazing and funny season, but scary as shit too.

As Nancy, Jonathan and the two party members were about to leave the Wheeler's house, Hopper drove up. Karen had followed them outside- Holly in tow- prepared to get in the car and help them look for her son.

"Search party is off." Hopper called, getting out of the car. "I got him with me."

"Thank God." Karen breathed, putting her bag on the steps and walking towards the truck. "The kids got me all worried." she told Hopper.

"Well, considering all that's happened, you know?" she nodded. Mike got out of the truck and slammed the door shut, letting out a quiet huff.

"Michael, what were you thinking? You had us all worried!" she scolded, but pulled him in for a hug, squeezing him tight.

"I kinda worried myself for a second there, too." he mumbled, hugging her back.

"Christ, Wheeler, what happened to your hands?" Max asked. Lucas had apparently gone and called Dustin on his supercom and they'd been close by.

"A tree." Mike deadpanned. "The dirt."

"I take it someone didn't stuff a frog down your throat either, eh?"

Steve joked. Dustin smacked him in the shoulder.

"No." Mike replied. He let go of his mom and made his way towards the house, patting Holly on the top of the head as he passed her.

"Michael! We need to talk!" Karen said, following him. "You kids go home. He's fine." she said, turning to them.

"But-"

"You heard her." Nancy sighed. "I have a feeling Mike's gonna blow up at her or something. At least go to Lucas' or Will's for now, I'll let you guys know if anything happens."

"I'll probably end up bringing El over later." Hopper said. "He was supposed to come after school but I don't see that happening now."

"You know what, no." Max shook her head. "We're gonna talk to that scrawny little shit too and he's gonna tell us what's going on."

"An intervention, if you will." Lucas said. Karen sighed.

"Fine, come on." As the group walked into the house and Karen forced Mike to stay in the living room, Joyce drove up. Jonathan and Steve filled her in on what was going on and she went in the house too. The two stayed outside to entertain Holly and Rosie.

"Is this an intervention or some shit?" Mike asked, crossing his arms from where he sat on the floor. The Party, Karen, Hopper, Joyce and Nancy sat around him in the living room.

"More or less." Dustin quipped.

"Well? Let's get it over with."

"Okay, well…" Karen looked around at everyone, unsure of what to say.

"Why don't you start with telling us how you feel?" Joyce asked.

"And don't be a sarcastic little jerk about it." Nancy added.

"Nancy." Karen warned.

"What? Half the shit that comes out of his mouth is sarcastic and *someone* has to be strict with him." Mike scoffed and she glared.

"You guys wanna know how I feel?" he asked. They nodded. "Hmm, let's see. First off, I feel pissed. At Nancy for that comment, but mainly at myself."

"Why at yourself?" Max asked.

"Because of the way I've been acting." he said. "And because this shouldn't be happening right now, when everyone else dealt with a lot more than I did."

"What do you mean? Dealt with what?" Hopper asked.

"You all have worse things to deal with than I do after these last two years. Why do I have nightmares about you all dying? Why am I so angry all the time? No, no, the real question is- Why are we focusing on me right now when everyone else has bigger demons than I do? Why not focus on Will and El- who had it much worse than me?"

"Because we talk about it." Will *hissed*. Mike started at that, looking at his best friend with wide eyes at the tone of voice. "Because we tell others what we're going through. About our own nightmares- our demons that we face. All of us, not just me and El. But you? You won't talk about it. Ever."

"Will's right." Dustin said. "You haven't uttered a single word- yes, I said uttered. I'm smart too." Dustin noticed the look on Max's face when he said the word, but continued. "You haven't *uttered* a *single* word about what *you* dealt with. And frankly, we're sick and tired of your shit and you blocking us out."

"Yeah, it's hard for all of us, dude." Lucas said. "We want to be here for you and you're starting to drive us away. We feel like you don't *want* to tell us. And why is that? Do you not trust us or something?"

"No." Mike whispered. "That's not it all- the exact opposite. Oh my God." Mike ran a hand over his face. "I want to tell you but it's

so *hard* to even think about. The nightmares I have… *those* would be what drive you away- they're awful, Lucas. *Awful.* I've tried my best not to drive you away and- God- I'm doing it anyway." he buried his face in his hands. Joyce put a hand on his shoulder but he scrambled away from her, standing up. "No, no. Don't-" he ran a hand through his hair.

"Okay, calm down Mike." Hopper said, holding his hands up.

"Telling me to calm down is not the right thing to do right now, Hop." Mike sniffed. "If you want me to talk about it- the things I've seen, the nightmares, *everything*, you have to promise not to leave me. Don't leave me alone, because if you do, I… I don't know what I- what I'd do."

"We promise, Mikey." Karen said. Everyone nodded in agreement.

"We love you, Mike. No matter how bad the things you tell us are, we'll still be here." Will said. Mike nodded.

"Will you sit down, Sweetie?" Joyce asked. Mike shook his head. "Okay, whatever you want to do." he nodded and leaned against the wall.

"O-okay. Um… first thing, well, I don't remember the last time I slept more than seven hours at night, and that's only the beginning." he started. "That started after Will got back and… and El was gone. I'd sleep, yeah, but I'd wake up every hour… never a restful sleep. Always worried I'd get a call that Will was gone again or… if he'd never been found." Mike wiped at his eyes, tears gathering in the corners. "Then the nightmares… the demogorgon would kill everyone I ever loved or I'd see Brenner torturing El, then turn into the demogorgon and kill her and… I'd wake up screaming but- but no one ever heard me. No one ever heard me scream.

"And then things went to shit again. The demodogs, the tunnels, the shadow monster, El coming back… I saw Bob get mauled to death. I turned around to make sure you and Mrs. Byers were okay and- and I saw him. I saw him, the blood- I heard the *screams* and I hear them every night. You-you told me not to look. You told me not to and I did anyway. I wish I hadn't. I saw all of them- all the bodies, all the

blood. I wanted to puke but I had to hold on to Will. I couldn't let him go- couldn't put him down." Mike gripped at his hair.

"That night at the Christmas Tree lighting, when you were still awake, mom." Mike looked at her. Her eyes were red, a single tear falling, more ready to fall. "That night I had a nightmare, that's why I was awake. All I could remember was hearing screams and gunshots and something roaring. I remember hearing the sound of flesh being ripped apart. That's the worst sound you can ever imagine hearing." he let out a gut wrenching sob, sliding down the wall until he was sitting, knees brought up to his chest. "And seeing it happen and hearing it is a whole other fucking level and I'm sorry for saying that word but my God, I'm so *scared* that I'll hear it *again*."

"You're never gonna hear that sound again." Hopper said, crouching in front of the terrified and crying boy. "*Never*. I promise you that. The gate was closed, Brenner's dead. No more monsters to cause that sound."

"You don't know that." Mike shook his head. "There are others like El. More that can open a gate."

"Maybe not, but I can promise that nothing will happen to you or her, or any of you, again. Okay?" Mike stared at him for a few seconds and nodded, finally.

"Is there… anything else you want or need to say?" Nancy asked. He sniffed and nodded. He looked at Max.

"I'm sorry." he said. "I never should've acted that way towards you, you never did anything wrong and you're one of my best friends."

"It's in the past, Mike." she told him, shaking her head. "Don't worry about it." he sniffed again and looked at Hopper.

"The night that everything ended… and I was screaming at Hop- he- you… you hugged me tighter than my dad ever did." Mike looked at the man. "I felt like I was loved, cared for even after I'd been such an ass and had yelled and hit you, but you hugged me anyways. And you never said anything else about it. I told Mr. Clarke that you've been more of a father to me than my dad has ever been. And it's the

truth. So I want to apologize. To you, and to everyone else for the way I've acted, the lies and that I made you feel like I couldn't trust you. I'm sorry."

"Can I hug you, kid?" Hopper asked. Mike wiped at his eyes and nodded, moving so he was sitting up completely. He raised his arms slightly and Hopper hugged him tight, just like he had that night, if not tighter. Mike clutched at the back of Hoppers jacket and let go, crying his heart out, sobs muffled by Hoppers shirt. Slowly, everyone joined the hug, all starting to cry

It took a little while, but eventually Mike calmed down and loosened his hold on Hopper to wipe his eyes again. Everyone else let go to give him room, cleaning their own faces.

"Here, baby." Karen said quietly, holding out a damp rag. He gave her a small smile and plopped it on his face, letting out a satisfied sigh at the coolness.

"I need a nap." he muttered.

"What?" Hopper asked.

"I need a nap." he repeated, a little louder. Hopper snorted.

"I bet you do kid. Which is why everyone- as in the children- need to get their asses out of here and go home and let the boy sleep." Hopper stood up and looked at the young teens, who all started complaining. "Come on, go ask Steve if he'll take you home." he told Max and Dustin.

"Um, actually, I was hoping I could stay with someone tonight?" Max asked. "Because, um, Billy isn't gonna be home this week and Neil is being… Neil. I'd rather not be the source of his anger."

"You, outside." Hopper told her. Her eyes widened. "You're not in trouble, kid. I need to talk to you." she nodded and went outside, Lucas following closely. "Henderson, get your ass outside and ask Harrington to take you home." Dustin pouted but nodded.

"I'll see you later, Mike." Dustin patted his shoulder and Mike nodded, waving a little. Hopper followed Dustin outside.

"Do we have a first aid kit anywhere?" Nancy asked, looking at her mom.

"Yeah, in the bathroom down here." Nancy nodded and went to get it. "Why-? Oh." Blood was slowly seeping through the bandages on Mike's hands. "Come on, baby. Sit on the couch." she helped Mike up and he plopped down on the couch.

"Punching a tree is never a good idea." he sighed.

"Do you feel a little better?" Joyce asked. Will sat on the couch next to Mike.

"Yeah… it feels like a weight has been lifted." he said, rubbing at his eyes with his wrist instead of his hands. "If I could only just sleep *without* nightmares."

"Maybe talking about them has helped." Will said. "It helped me." Mike nodded.

"Hopefully."

Nancy came back with the first aid kit and sat in front of Mike on the floor.

"Jesus Christ, Mike, how hard were you hitting the tree?" Will asked, seeing the cuts on his friend's hand. Mike shrugged.

"Hard? I left a mark in the tree I think. Knocked some bark off it." he winced as Nancy took the bandages off and started cleaning them again. His hands throbbed, now that he could actually *feel* something.

"Sorry." Nancy muttered. "I know it hurts."

"It's fine." he shrugged.

By the time Nancy had finished with Mike's hands, taking her time to do it perfectly, everyone had left except for Hopper and Max. Karen had gone outside to see what was going on, and now, Max was spending the rest of the week- maybe even longer- at Mike's house. When the three came back in, Holly was on Max's hip and Rosie ran and jumped on the couch, whining and nuzzling at Mike's arms and

stomach. He chuckled a little and scratched behind her ears. She settled down and curled up, half on his lap and half on the couch between Mike and the arm of the couch. Mike put his head in the crook of his arm and let his hand hang over the side.

"I'm gonna take Red here to get some clothes and make sure nothing happens."
Hopper said. "And we're gonna pick El up and bring her over for a while, because I'm sure she's worried since you didn't go over there after school."

"*Shit* I forgot." he groaned.

"It's fine, kid. I'm sure she'll understand."

"Yes." Hopper jumped and turned to see El, arms crossed.

"What the hell-"

"I walked." she said. "I had a bad feeling, and I went in the void and heard everything. You didn't call." she glared at Hopper.

"You're not supposed to just leave and *walk* here."

"What else was I supposed to do? Wait on you to get back?" she fired back. "I was worried. Sue me." Mike couldn't help but smile at her response.

"We'll talk about this later. C'mon, Red." Hopper walked out. Max looked at El, who shrugged. Max put Holly down and followed Hopper. El rushed over to Mike, jumping on the couch next to him and hugging him tight.

"Why didn't you tell me any of that?" she asked.

"I didn't think it was… important. Or top priority."

"You're important, and *my* top priority." Hopper had explained to her what that meant a few days ago when telling her shoveling poop was top priority for them- mainly her. He gave her a watery smile and sniffed.

"Here Mikey." Holly said in her cute toddler voice, holding both hands out, a handful of tissues in one hand and a teddy bear in the other. "Mama gives me both of these when I'm sad." Mike almost started crying again, and instead clutched the bear in one hand and hugged the small girl.

"Thanks, Holly." she gave him a bright smile and skipped off, Rosie jumping down and following her curiously.

"You should sleep." El told him.

"I don't know… the nightmares…"

"I'll be here." she said. "I'll wake you up if you have one." he gave her a smile and nodded.

"Thank you."

The two awkwardly moved around until they were both lying on the couch, Mike's head resting on El's shoulder as she played with his hair. It didn't take long for him to fall asleep, and when he did, he was *out.*

When Hopper and Max got back, it was nearing seven in the evening and Karen was making dinner, Holly was watching cartoons in the living room with her brother and his girlfriend asleep on the couch.

"Be quiet." Nancy whispered to them as she came down the stairs. "He's been asleep since you left. He needs it." Hopper nodded. "I'll take her bag upstairs." he handed it to her and she gave Max a smile before going back to her room. The Hopper made his way into the kitchen, where Karen was stirring Mac and Cheese, still making Mike's favorite dinner, which was in the oven. Lasagna, and the Mac and Cheese was for Holly. Max went in the living room and sat with Holly and played with Rosie.

"Dinner will be ready in ten minutes." she told them. "You're more than welcome to stay, Jim."

"Thanks, Karen." Hopper smiled at her.

"And El can stay the night if she feels she needs to, and if you let her.

I know they won't do anything."

"I know they won't, especially since I'm pretty sure he'll be knocked out until tomorrow afternoon- if he isn't going to school."

"Oh no, he's staying home and getting rest. For as long as he needs." Hopper nodded.

"I just don't want them to think this is gonna happen often. Tonight is just a special case considering all that's been going on with him."

"I understand, believe me, I'd much rather my teenage son *not* have his teenage girlfriend over at night but…" she shrugged. "If she helps him sleep, I don't care."

"Does the dog sleep with him at night?" he asked, making a face.

"No, she stays down here. Or, she's supposed to but she's always in front of his door when I get up in the mornings."

"Maybe you guys should let her in his room. She might help, the feeling of someone- or something, more like- with him, might ground him and help with the nightmares."

"You have a point. I'll ask him if he's alright with it and we'll try it out. The main reason we don't let her in rooms because she makes *the* mess of a lifetime. And with their rooms? Lord, she'd have a ball in there, as much stuff as they have in there."

"I know what you mean, that damn cat has shredded at least four rolls of toilet paper. And that shit ain't cheap." Karen chuckled. "Wheeler has ruined my curtains, I tell you. If he hadn't gotten her that cat…"

"If I remember correctly, he asked *you* if he could get her one, and you *said yes*."

"Yeah, yeah." he waved her off and she laughed. "It's my fault too."

"Mhm."

It wasn't long after that Mike woke up, because Rosie barked when

she saw another dog on the TV and it woke him up.

"Jesus." he muttered. "What time is it?"

"Seven something." El told him sitting up. She looked at him and giggled a little at his hair.

"What?" he asked, sitting up as well and scratching his head, making his hair even worse.

"Your hair." she replied. "It's all crazy."

"Oh." he smoothed it down a little but it popped right back up. She just smiled and didn't say anything.

"Oh, you're awake." Karen said, walking in the living room, having come to get Holly. "Dinner's ready, Sweetie." he yawned and nodded. He and El stood and went in the dining room and sat at the table next to each other, Mike beside Holly and El on his other side. Everyone else was sat already, and as Karen dished out the lasagna, she told Mike, "You can have as much as you want, I'm sure you're hungry." he shrugged and nodded a little.

It was quiet for a few minutes as they ate, and eventually, with a little grin, Max asked,

"So, Hopper, are you gonna arrest Mike for breaking Troy's nose?" Mike glared at her and Hopper snorted.

"No, from what I've heard, the kid deserved it. I have a feeling that if he hadn't broken his nose, Mike would be the one with something broken." Mike nodded, looking down at his food.

"Troy tripped Mike on the playground when we first met." El said. "I didn't see it but he told me."

"How long has he been bothering you kids?" Hopper asked. Mike snorted.

"As long as I can remember." Mike replied. "Started in first grade and as the years go by it gets worse and worse."

"I'll make him pee his pants again if you want." El told him. Mike smiled at her.

"As awesome as that was, I don't think that'd be a great idea." he told her. "Thank you, though." she shrugged and smiled back.

"You're welcome, Bean." Mike choked on his drink.

"I forgot about that."

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

> So, I know I said a few chapters ago that El already started her period and stuff, but I'm changing it so that she hasn't- because I actually want to write it now (some of it at least), but it's not in the chapter. You'll see what I mean. Therefore, by the time this is posted that chapter will have a few less words XD.

After dinner, Karen sent Mike upstairs to have a shower before he went to bed, Nancy went to call Jonathan, and while Karen was making a bed in Nancy's room for Max, Hopper talked to El.

"I don't want you and him sleeping in the same bed." he was telling her.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because… you're a girl, and he's a boy." she just stared at him. "Man, I really need to get Joyce to talk to you." he sighed. "I heard he has a bunk bed, so if he does, I want you to sleep on the top of it, or the bottom. Whichever you choose and he has to sleep on the other one, got it?"

"Uh, sure?" It came out like a question. He ruffled her hair.

"Just no funny business."

"No funny business." she confirmed, even though she had no idea what it meant.

"I'll be glad to explain to her what you're talking about, Hop." Max said with a small grin.

"Oh no, an *adult* needs to talk to her- wait, what do *you* know about *funny business*?" Hopper asked, pointing at the red head.

"Um, health class?" she said. "I pay attention. All the boys were red faced when the teacher talked about periods."

"Periods? Like at the end of a sentence?"

"Hop, has El had a period yet?" Karen asked. Hopper shook his head. "If you want me to, I'll be glad to talk to her about them tomorrow? I know Joyce is fully capable to do it but, I have two daughters, one of which has been having her period for a few years now, so…"

"Uh, yeah, that'd be great."

They heard footsteps coming down the stairs and looked up to see Mike with dripping wet hair, a towel thrown over his shoulders.

"Oh, you're still here." Mike muttered, coming to a stop at the bottom of the stairs.

"Yeah, kid. El is gonna stay tonight and tonight only." Hopper gave him a look. "She can sleep on either the top or bottom bunk. Not in the same bed."

"What do you think I'd try to do?" Mike replied, squinting at him. "I'm this close to passing out." Mike held his forefinger and thumb close together.

"Okay, good point, but I still don't want you in the same bed." Hopper said. "Now dry your hair and go to bed, you *do* look like you're gonna pass out any second now."

"My hair *is* dry?" Mike said, confused.

"Dude, you're hair is literally dripping with water." Max said, rolling her eyes.

Mike reached up and touched his head. "Oh." he said softly. Karen couldn't help but snort, taking the towel from around his shoulders.

"Sit down on the stairs and I'll dry it." Mike didn't even arguing, doing what his mother asked.

"I'd better head out, but I'll see you bright and early after work tomorrow, okay?" Hopper asked.

"*What*?" she asked, eyebrows raising. He chuckled.

"I was joking. I'll see you between five and six o'clock."

"Alright. Love you dad." she hugged him.

"I love you too, kid. Bye, Wheeler, don't test my patience by sleeping in the same bed as my daughter." Mike just waved him off as his mom attacked him with the towel, feeling like a kid who just got out of the bath and his mom was drying his hair again. Hopper chuckled and waved to Max, "Oh, and someone is gonna need to put something on his hands and bandage him up again." he said before finally leaving.

"I'll go get the stuff to do it. I've had a lot of skating injuries so I know how to treat them." Max said, before making her way down the hall to the kitchen.

"My God, Michael, you need a haircut." Karen said, taking the towel off his head. His hair poofed out slightly, random, frizzy curls sticking out all over, and Max and El giggled. She ran her fingers through it.

"No, 'cause last time I got a haircut I got a bowl cut."

"Hey, Will has a bowl cut." Max said, poking her head back around the corner.. "You're insulting your friend!"

"You're a bowl cut." he muttered, resting his head against Karen's leg. Max made a face.

"Yep, time for bed. C'mon." Karen tapped his head a couple times and he sat up, grumbling as he stood. Still, he gave El a grin and held out his hand to her. She gladly took it and followed him up to his room.

"You want the top or the bottom?" Mike asked her, slightly swaying on his feet. She giggled.

"Top is okay. I don't think you can climb."

"I'll have you know I'm a great climber." he retorted.

"Mike you couldn't climb the rope out of the tunnels. Stop lying to your girlfriend." Max said as she passed his room, heading to Nancy's

room to ask where the bandages she used were.

"Shut up, Max." he grumbled. El just grinned.

"Hey, I know you guys wouldn't be trying anything but… if El *accidentally* gets into bed with you, I won't say anything. Just leave the door open." Karen said.

"But… the dog." he said.

"I'm gonna put Holly's old baby gate at the bottom of the stairs. She can't get up here, then."

"Oh." he nodded and fell flat on his face on his bed.

"Mike, get under your covers." he groaned but slid until he was half off the bed and pulled the covers back, climbing back into bed, but stayed sitting up because he'd fall asleep otherwise and Max still had to fix his hands. Karen walked over and leaned down, kissing him on the forehead.

"Telling us all that really took a lot out of you, huh?" Mike nodded, blinking slowly at her. She smiled and ruffled his hair a little. "Go to sleep, I'll see you in the morning, or whenever you get up." he nodded.

"If you need anything, let me know, okay El?" Karen said, giving the girl a quick hug. El nodded.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Call me Karen." she chuckled. "And goodnight."

El turned to her boyfriends bed, where he was two seconds away from falling asleep, despite sitting up. She climbed in next to him, and though it was a tight squeeze, was able to get comfortable.

"You don't have to stay with me right now, El." Mike told her quietly, practically squinting at her. "It's still early."

"It's okay." El replied. Mike opened his eyes long enough to look at his alarm clock.

"It's not even 8:30, El, go hang out with Max if you want to."

"Do you want me to leave?" she asked.

"No, no, no, no, I just… I don't want you to feel like you *have* to stay with me after what I said."

"Oh."

"Because you don't have to. I'll be alright if you leave for a little bit. I'll leave you some space."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"One hundred and eleven percent sure." she giggled at that.

"Okay. I'll go hang out with her after she does your hands." El told him. He smiled and nodded.

Just a minute or so later, Max came back in, hands full of different things. Mike didn't know what half of them were but he wasn't gonna ask.

"Okay Wheeler, hold your hands out so we can get this done as fast as possible." Max told him.

"Okay." he did as he was told, resting his elbows on his knees. He watched her put rubbing alcohol on a paper towel, and hissed when she dabbed at his hands with it.

"Sorry." she muttered. "I know it sucks but it's even worse if it gets infected."

"S'fine." he replied, grimacing a little. She put some other ointment on them, in a yellow tube- he couldn't for the life of him remember the name of it right now- and quickly, but carefully wrapped his hands back up, tight enough to actually do some good, but not too tight to be uncomfortable. "You should be a nurse." he muttered, blinking sleepily. She snorted.

"Imagine that, me, a nurse! I couldn't do it." she shook her head. "I can't handle the goopy puke and sick people." he shrugged in

response and she snorted. "Well, there you go. I'll change them again sometime tomorrow. Your mom will probably do it for you while I'm at school." he nodded. "Night, turd."

"Night." he replied, sniffing a little. El stood as he lied on his back, pulling the covers up, and said,

"Yell if you need me." she pecked him on the lips, walking backwards behind Max.

"I will. Goodnight, El."

"Goodnight, Mike."

Tuesday, February 26, 1985

"Hey El, wake up." El felt someone poking her shoulder lightly, their soft voice slowly waking her up. She opened her eyes and saw Nancy standing above her, book bag thrown over her shoulder. "Good morning, sunshine." she joked. El smiled a little.

"Good morning." El whispered.

"You can go back to sleep, I just wanted to tell you Max and I are leaving for school." she told her. "Mom and Holly are downstairs making breakfast if you do want to stay up and eat."

"I'm gonna stay with Mike. For a few minutes." El told her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll see you later."

With a little wave, Nancy walked out. As Max passed the door she waved but didn't stop to talk, just about running down the hall to catch up with Nancy.

El looked at her boyfriend, who, as long and gangly as he was, was curled up against the wall, his back to her, sleeping like a rock. She smiled and rolled over, laying next to him and placing her head on the other side of his pillow, nuzzling his back with her forehead and letting out a small breath, soon falling back to sleep.

For the first few seconds of consciousness, Mike didn't know where he was, or what the hell happened. He almost felt like he'd been knocked out, but his head didn't hurt, which confused him.

He tried to turn over, but there was something blocking him, and he nearly jumped when he looked, not expecting El to be asleep next to him. He sat up instead and rubbed at his eyes. He huffed and dropped his hands into his lap, looking at his clock. It was a few minutes after eleven and not one single nightmare. He scratched his head and looked down at El.

"El." he whispered, tapping her shoulder a few times. She let out a little snort and opened her eyes.

"Hey." she said, stretching and sitting up. "Did you sleep good?"

"Ah, yeah, actually. No nightmares at all."

"Good." she smiled at him, and kissed his cheek.

"Good morning you two!" Karen announced her presence and the two jumped.

"Jeez mom!" Mike grumbled.

"I've been standing here for at least five minutes, Mike." she chuckled. "It's not my fault you didn't notice me. You missed breakfast, but I can make you two something now if you're hungry."

The couple nodded and got out of bed, following Karen downstairs. El went into the living room with Holly while Mike made his way to the bathroom.

"Hi El." Holly grinned sweetly at her. El waved at her and sat on the couch. "Can I ask question?" she asked in her little voice.

"Yes." El nodded.

"Why is Mikey sad?" she asked, tilting her head to the side a bit.

"Oh." El bit her lip. "Um. Mike has been… tired, a lot." Holly nodded,

listening intently. "He has bad dreams, sometimes… about bad men."

"Like my daddy?" Holly asked. El swallowed and thought for a few seconds. She knew it wasn't right to talk bad about someone, especially to their child but… technically, Holly said it.

"Yeah, like him." El nodded.

"Daddy is mean to him. I don't like mean."

"I don't either." El agreed. "Mike is… okay now, though. He's gonna get better."

"Mhm." Holly agreed, smiling. "Because you make him better. Thank you for makin' him feel better." Holly threw her arms around El and hugged her tightly. El jumped slightly, surprised, but hugged the toddler back, a small smile on her face. She kissed the side of her head and rested her chin on Holly's little shoulder.

In the hallway, Karen and Mike looked at each other, one of the biggest grins on Mike's face. Karen hadn't seen it in a while. She ruffled his hair and went back in the kitchen to finish lunch.

Mike waited until Holly let El go, and walked in, making as much noise with his feet as he could so they'd know he was coming.

"What are you two ladies doing?

"So…" Steve said, sitting on the hood of Jonathan's car. "Yesterday was… something."

Nancy scoffed. "You're telling me. I didn't sleep that much 'cause I was afraid Mike would have a nightmare and start screaming or something. I've never heard him before, but I guess since I knew he was having nightmares messed me up."

"He didn't, though, did he?"

"As far as I know, no. El was with him last night." she said. "He was conked out this morning, didn't move a muscle when I woke El up to tell her we're leaving."

"We?" Jonathan asked.

"I took Max to school this morning. She's staying with us right now."

"Why? What happened?" Steve demanded.

"She asked if she could stay with someone last night. Apparently Billy isn't gonna be home this week, and she's scared to stay alone at her house without him there. She didn't actually say she was scared, but I put two and two together."

"Are you actually kidding?" Steve asked. Nancy shook her head.

"Yep. Hopper talked to her last night after everything with Mike, and then mom joined them to see what was going on, and she's gonna stay with us until Billy gets back. After that, well… I don't know what's going to happen there."

"Christ. Remind me to talk to that little shit." Steve ran a hand over his face. "Now, onto another little shit. How's Mike doing now?"

"Well, as I said earlier-" she gave him a look.

"I wasn't paying attention."

"You're an idiot." she rolled her eyes.

"He didn't have any nightmares last night." Jonathan answered for her. "And he was still sleeping this morning when she left."

"Ah okay." Steve nodded. He took a bite of his sandwich. "Question for Nancy." he said, mouth full of food.

"What?" she asked, sipping her drink.

"Mike doesn't have any older brothers." he said. Jonathan let out a sigh and smacked his head against the drivers side window, where he was standing.

"Obviously not." then she thought about it. "Well, debatable. I don't know how old dad's other *kids* are. He might have an older brother- hell, I *could* have one." she rolled her eyes, huffing as she crossed her

arms over her chest.

"He can go fuck himself." Jonathan muttered. Nancy and Steve nodded in agreement.

"We could be his big brothers." Steve pointed to himself and Jonathan. Nancy raised an eyebrow.

"I can see Jonathan being his big brother… I think he says you're just a babysitter- I'm joking, Steve, I'm joking." she couldn't help but laugh at the offended look on his face. "I'm assuming you two've already talked about this, so what're you guys thinking?"

"Well… Anyone in a ten mile radius can tell that Mike had an awesome time when he and Hop went out that night." Jonathan started. "And it was doing stuff he liked to do, and something new Hopper did with him. We were thinking we could do that with him? Ya know, I already feel like he's my little brother, what with knowing him since he was five, and all… and really, I want him to be happy too, and do stuff he wants."

"I agree. We're not forcing him to watch sports and other shit like that unless he wants to. If he wants to spend four hours at the arcade beating my ass at Pac-Man he can have at it." Steve said, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. Nancy snorted.

"You are really bad at it. And it's so easy!"

"Not when like four ghosts are trying to eat you or whatever the hell they're doing!" Steve exclaimed. Nancy rolled her eyes.

"But what do you think? Would you be alright with us doing that?" Jonathan asked.

"Well I mean… it's not my decision, is it? I don't care, I'd be glad for you guys to! It's up to Mike to let you in, though, we've never had deep conversations or really spent any time together other than fighting monsters and shit, so I don't know how easy it'll be to get him to do stuff outside of his friend group, you know?"

"We get it." Steve nodded in understanding. "We're not gonna just kidnap him and make him go places, just talk to him more and

suggest doing things and see how he acts. And of course we'll do shit with the rest of the little shitheads, not just Mike, but you know what we mean."

"I know." Nancy chuckled. "And stop calling my brother a shithead, shithead!"

Max was *furious* as she stared at the popular girl in front of her, said girl bragging about how fast she was able to get the news of Mike's parents around.

"You bitch!" Max damn near shrieked, storming up to her in the hallway. Stacy immediately turned in her direction, a scowl on her face.

"Excuse me? I know you're not talking to me, tomboy." she rolled her eyes, looking at her friends as if that was a good insult, when it really wasn't to begin with.

"Damn right I'm talking to you, *bitch*. How *dare* you spread this shit about Mike around! Do you not have a heart?" Max demanded.

"Not for his nerdy ass, no, I don't. All he's useful for is to cheat off him." Stacy shrugged.

"You're nothing but shit, Stacy. You're just jealous that you're nowhere near as smart as him."

"I'm jealous of *no one*." Stacy snickered. Max scoffed.

"Sure. You're really just making a fool of yourself. You really think any of us care that you're popular or what outfit you're wearing today? No, we fucking don't, Stacy. And you *are* jealous of someone! And that someone is-"

Lucas rushed forward and grabbed Max's arm, trying to pull her away from the popular girl before she started trying to fist fight- he knew it was only a matter of time.

"-Mike's older sister! Don't think I didn't see you watching her dance with Dustin at the Snowball!"

"Max, she's not worth getting in trouble over, c'mon." Lucas pulled at her arm.

"No, fuck her! She deserves to know how shitty she is! Stop trying to ruin everyone's lives, Stacy, bullying and spreading rumors and shit is only gonna make you look stupid in the long run, so how about think with your *own* head, and fucking stop." with a huff and not another word, Max grabbed her boyfriend this time, and pulled him along with her as she stomped towards the door. "And you better fucking believe I'm gonna snitch on her ass for cheating."

Meanwhile, Will and Dustin were waiting for the couple at the bike rack when Troy and James walked up. Troy's nose had a white strip over the top of it, dark bruises surrounding it and under his eyes.

"I'm assuming Frogface got in trouble? That why he's not here?" Troy asked, grinning smugly.

"Nope." Dustin shook his head. "His mom was so proud of him for punching your face in she let him stay home today."

The grin fell from Troy's face and he glared. James mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Seriously, where's the dickhead at?" Troy demanded.

"He's not here, Troy, the fuck else you want me to say?" Dustin said, rolling his eyes. Then, hardly two seconds later, Dustin was sprawled out on top of he and his friends bikes.

"Hey!" Will exclaimed.

"Back off, Zombie Boy." James hissed. Troy grabbed Dustin by the collar of his shirt and hauled him up, slamming him against the bike rack.

"Keep talking shit, Toothless. You don't know what I can do to you-"

"Oh but will you do it?" Dustin asked. "You don't have the nerve to do *shit*." Dustin saw Mr. Clarke making his way towards them quickly, eyes about to bug out of his head. He smirked at Troy.

"The fuck are you-" Troy started, but was interrupted.

"HEY!" someone barked. "What's going on here?" Hopper demanded, stomping up to the teens and grabbing Troy by the back of his shirt and pulling him away from Dustin.

"Yeah, what the fuck?" Max asked, stopping next to Will, Lucas behind her.

"Ms. Mayfield." Mr. Clarke sighed.

"Red." Hopper snapped.

"Sorry." she muttered.

"What's going on here?"

"He keeps talking shit to me sir-" Troy said, putting on an act.

"Oh shut it, I wasn't talking to you. I know all about you and what you've done to these kids. Henderson, Byers, what happened?"

Dustin went on to explain how Troy was looking for Mike and then pushed him into the bike rack. James slowly started backing up, to try and get away, but Mr. Clarke grabbed his shoulder.

"Uh uh." he shook his head. "You stay right here."

"What were you going to do to Mike? Hm?" Hopper asked.

"Do *you* see what *he* did to me?" Troy shrieked. "He broke my nose!"

"It was well deserved." Hopper said, scratching his beard. "You and you." he pointed at Troy and James. "Are going to follow Mr. Clarke here to the principal's office. I'll be in shortly to discuss your punishment, because it seems you were looking to hurt, Mike, weren't you?"

"No-!"

"Sure, Mr. Clarke?"

"Yes sir." Mr. Clarke nodded. "Boys, go to the principal's office. I'll be

right behind you." he turned to Max. "Real quick, what was going on between you and Stacy in the hall?" Max practically gasped at that and clapped her hands.

"Oh my *God* Mr. Clarke you have no idea how I wanted to yank that damn scrunchie out her head- she's the one who's been telling everyone about Mike's family. She heard you and Mrs. Wheeler talking about it and immediately freaking told the whole school."

"I see. Well-"

"Also, she's been cheating off Mike in every class they share, she told me herself." Max added.

'It's true, I heard her." Lucas nodded in agreement.

"I see. I'll take care of it. Thank you, kids." he turned and made his way back into the school, grabbing Stacy on his way back in. Everyone turned to Hopper.

"Are you kids alright, though? No harm done?"
"I almost shit myself, but other than that, fine." Dustin said.

"Good, well… I'm gonna go and have a chat with these boys. I'll see you later if you're at Wheeler's house."

"Okay!" they replied in unison.

"Wait, I don't see your truck, how'd you get here?" Will asked.

"I decided to take a walk." Hopper shrugged. "I figured that those two would be waiting for Mike, so I decided to come see for myself what would happen."

"You sneaky, sneaky man!" Dustin pointed at him. Hopper grinned and made his way into the school. "Man, he's awesome."

The Party spent the next few hours teaching El new games- she was the best at Uno- as Hopper had ended up being a little later than he thought, having to deal with the bullies.

Karen told Hopper about the moment between El and Holly earlier in the day, gushing about how sweet El was.

"It was precious, Hopper, it really was. You should've seen it, she was so careful with her words, it was so sweet. You should've seen how Mike was looking at her- that boy is in *love*."

"Hey kid?" Hopper asked, nudging Mike in the shoulder. He and El were about to take off. Mike turned to look at him and Hopper motioned for him to follow him into the kitchen. Mike did as he was asked and was met with an amused looking Hopper.

"What's up?"

"I know El slept in your bed with you." It took all Hopper had in him to keep from laughing at the horrified expression on the kids face.

"I promise you we didn't do anything- I- I *wouldn't* pressure her to do anything, *oh my God* how did you find out?" Mike babbled, barely taking a breath. Hopper chuckled and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm not mad, kid. I knew she'd end up there anyways, it doesn't take a lot for me to figure it out. And I know you wouldn't, kid, we already talked about this once."

"Yeah but… I still wouldn't do anything. Ever." Mike shook his head.

"I know. Also, you need to learn how to take a breath when you babble like that, you're gonna pass out one of these days. Now, go hug El bye, we've gotta go, I've got food in the truck."

Hopper would lie to anyone, but hearing that, and then seeing the way the young couple hugged each other goodbye warmed his heart just a little more- he still had to have that tough exterior, you know? What with being Chief of Police and all, he had a reputation!

"Karen told me about you and little Wheeler's talk today." Hopper told his daughter, who turned and looked at him, eyebrows furrowed.

"She did? She heard?"

"She and Mike both did." he told her.

"Oh."

"I'm proud of you, kid." Hopper told her. "You did good explaining to her."

"I did?"

"Mhm. There wasn't a better way to explain it to her, really, as young as she is." he said, glancing at her. She nodded.

"I like Holly." she said, smiling. "She's very… sweet."

"Kids usually are." he chuckled. "But so are you, though you are a bit of a firecracker at times."

"What's a firecracker?"

12. Chapter 12

Notes for the Chapter:

> Oh damnnnnn it's been like seven months :0 I'm so sorry y'all I been dealing with a lot and then the virus happened and more bullshit started happening along with it and yeah it sucked. I also kinda got outta writing for a while, binge watching shows and playing video games xD. Again, I'm sorry and hope to never take that long again! But no promises!
>
> I hope everyone has been and is being safe out there!

After dinner that night, nearing eight o'clock, Nancy knocked on Mike's door frame, "Hey Mikey, whatcha doing?"

Mike looked up from his spot on the bed, a pencil hanging from his mouth by the eraser.

"Homework." he said, his voice muffled a bit by the pencil. She snorted and shook her head. He let the pencil fall out his mouth and onto his notebook.

"Can we talk?" she asked. He nodded and started picking up some other books and papers so she could sit down.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I, uh, I just wanted to see if you wanted to talk about anything… You know, if you have anything else you want or need to get off your chest? I know yesterday was a lot, but… I know what it's like to bottle up feelings and then let them crash out all at once."

"Oh." Mike muttered. "I, um… I mean, not really? I kinda spilled my guts completely yesterday, I think." he furrowed his brows. "Yeah, no, nothing else."

"Are you sure? It doesn't even have to be about anything bad, it can be about something else."

“What, want me to talk about my day? Like that type of thing?” he asked. “Small talk?”

“Kinda, I guess.” she chuckled.

“Oh, well… yeah, I guess there’s some stuff I can talk about, like… we taught El how to play a bunch of games while you were out, and she’s actually insanely good at Uno, like, she was ruthless, giving us plus two’s or plus fours and skipping us with no remorse. You could see it in her eyes.” he pointed at his own eyes and Nancy laughed. “And Holly… well, she asked El why I’ve been so sad when I got up this morning.”

“What’d El tell her?”

“She pretty much just said that I was really tired and that I had bad dreams sometimes, about bad men.” he bit his lip. “And Holly asked if the bad men were like dad.”

“Ah.” Nancy nodded. “God, it sucks. She’s too young to be asking shit like that and I hate it.”

“Dad’s the biggest dick.” Mike grumbled. “Holly told El that dad was mean to me and that she didn’t like mean. Holly’s smart as hell, and I’m sure she’d figure shit like this out on her own eventually but she’s literally four years old, what the fuck.”

“I know.” Nancy smiled sadly. Neither said anything for a few minutes, and with a sniff, Mike looked down at his lap and said,

“Some of those dreams weren’t even… weren’t even of all the shit we dealt with, it was like… dad just became this big monster or something and tried to kill us, or… sometimes he found out about El and he told and the Government came and caught her no matter how hard we tried to hide her. Sometimes she was even killed because of dad.”

“I wish you would’ve told me, Mike.”

He waved her off and shook his head.

“It’s really not that big a deal, Nance. Not anymore at least.” he

shrugged. “But anyways, mom and I saw the whole conversation- they don’t know that, though- and Holly thanked El for making me feel better and hugged her, and El kissed the side of her head and I just- ugh.” Mike put his hands near his head and made a “boom” noise while pulling his hands away and spreading out his fingers. Mindblown. Nancy laughed.

“You really love her, don’t you?” Nancy asked. Mike’s face immediately turned red and she grinned and put her hands on his shoulders, shaking him slightly. “Mikey’s in love! Mikey’s in love!” she sang and he swatted at her arms, falling back onto the bed and putting his feet in her face. She let out a shriek and nearly fell trying to get away from them. He laughed at that and sat back up as she stood in front of his bed, her hands on her hips. “That was *so* not cool, Michael!” she scolded and he grinned at her. “I’m going to do some homework of my own, so if you need me, you know where I’ll be, okay?” he nodded, but raised his brows at her.

“Are you sure you’re not just gonna be talking to Jonathan for hours on end?” he asked. She flipped him off but didn’t say anything, walking towards his bedroom door. “Nance, I know I’m a noodle and have little to no strength, but if he hurts you, I’ll beat him up, okay?” she laughed and gave him a thumbs up, finally leaving his room. He heard laughing as she walked down the hallway and grinned to himself. He went back to his homework, which he finished in about twenty minutes.

Once he packed up all of his stuff, Max knocked on the door frame and walked in and flopped on his bed, dropping the first aid kit between them. Mike stared at her for a moment, but she didn’t say anything.

“So, uh, how was school?” he asked. “Dustin told me about what Troy did.”

Max scoffed at the mention of Troy, and turned over onto her side to look at Mike.

“You know who told the whole school about what was going on with your parents?”

“Who?” he asked.

“Stacy fucking Albright.” she replied. “She overheard your mom telling Mr. Clarke what was going on and immediately began telling people.” Mike snorted.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all.” he shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t care. I hope the entire town finds out and all my dads *friends* find out how shit he really is.” Max nodded in agreement.

“If only the whole town could find out about *Neil* .” she shook her head. “But that’ll never happen, because he’d kill me if I told someone and it spread.”

Mike stared at her for a moment, and cocked his head slightly to the side.

“Max, has he ever hit you?” he asked. She wouldn’t look up at him, instead keeping her eyes on the first aid kit. “Max, you need to tell Hopper.”

“Oh no.” she shook her head and finally looked up at him. “That’s certain death.”

“Hopper can and will help you if you tell him, Max. Honestly, if you ask me, it’s obvious that something isn’t right at your house, if you don’t want to stay with Neil *and* your mom. It’s not hard to put two and two together. Hop can help you and your mom, Max.”

“No, he can’t, because my mother will take Neil’s side. Every single time. She always has, always will.”

“Well screw your mom then, Max. She’s no good either if she lets Neil abuse you and Billy.”

“I can’t just leave her alone with him, Mike. Not permanently.”

“Sometimes you’ve got to just look out for you, Max.” Mike replied. Max didn’t say anything, instead opening the first aid box and grabbing what she needed. Mike sighed and held out his hands and let her do what she needed to do.

“I’m scared.” she said, eventually. “And you don’t know how hard it was for me to tell *you* that. But I’m terrified of what will happen. That’s why I’ve never said anything.” she wrapped his left hand with gauze and moved on to his right.

“Well… if I *ever* see a bruise on you that I *know* didn’t come from skateboarding, I’m going to tell Hopper.” Mike said. “And you can get mad and hate me for it, but I don’t want you hurt either.” she finished with his right hand and began putting supplies up.

“Well, I’ll be sure to hide any and all of them, then.” she replied easily. “But thank you, anyways. It means a lot. And I’ll only be here for a few days, don’t get used to me being here, Wheeler.” Mike rolled his eyes and sighed.

“You’re welcome. And I won’t miss you at all.” he retorted. She let out a snort and nodded, standing.

“Are you going to school tomorrow?” she asked.

“I don’t know, I have to see what mom thinks about it.” he told her. She nodded.

“Well, if you find out before we go to bed let me know so I can be prepared for the car ride in the morning.” he rolled his eyes once again and nodded.

“Will do.” he saluted her and she laughed, walking out of the room.

Mike sighed and stood, walking across the hall to the bathroom to brush his teeth before continuing down the hall to seek out his mom, who was in her bedroom, leaning against her dresser. One of the bottom drawers was slightly open, a frilly pink *something* halfway falling out, but he didn’t comment on it. She wasn’t doing anything, just looking back and forth around the room.

“Mom?” he asked quietly, standing in the doorway. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Thinking about all the changes I can make to this room now.” she replied. “Most of this was your dad's choice. Always wanted it plain, old school.”

“Even the bed sheets and covers?” he asked, walking over and standing beside her.

“Even those.”

“I always thought they were ugly.” he said. She laughed at that, nodding and wrapping an arm around him, pulling him in for a side hug.

“So, what do you say, you stay home for one more day- bad parenting, I know-” she winked at him, “and you, Holly and I go shopping for paint and new bed clothes?” she asked. He gave her a cheesy grin.

“Definitely!”

Mike returned to school the day after that, and everyone stared when he walked by. Some at his hands, some just at him in general. He knew they were still whispering about what was going on with his dad, but the majority was the fight with Troy. A few random people he’d never spoken to before even came up to him and high fived him or shook his hand, without saying a word. A fact that the Party teased him about relentlessly.

Three days later, with the help of her children and Max, Karen had her room completely transformed. Nancy helped her put most of her clothes that were in the old dresser Ted liked, in the closet on hangers, and Mike and Max dug out a much smaller dresser for her to put things that couldn’t be put on hangers in. Jonathan and Steve gladly came over and took the dresser out of the room and into Hopper’s blazer, and took it off to who knows where. A love seat now took its place, a spot where Mike discovered he enjoyed working on homework or D&D campaigns on. Karen even took the liberty of climbing up in the attic and throwing the rest of Ted’s shit into a few trash bags, which were now sitting in the garage for the time being. Including some important papers she knew he’d eventually come back for.

By the weekend, Billy returned from wherever he’d gone, meaning Max was back home now, which none of the Wheeler’s were too

happy about. A few nights before she went back home, she and Mike had another conversation about her home life.

“I feel like a horrible person for saying this but… the reason I feel safer when Billy’s home is because Neil will take his bullshit anger out on Billy instead of me. The only time he ever…” she poked her head out of Mike’s bedroom door to make sure Karen or Nancy weren’t walking around, and sat back on his bed. “The only time he ever hits me is when Billy’s not there to take it.”

“It shouldn’t be like that, Max!” Mike exclaimed quietly. She smacked his foot with a pillow.

“Shh! And you don’t think I know that? The term is *dumb blonde* not *dumb redhead* .” she grumbled.

“I’m not calling you dumb, Max.” Mike sighed. “Is Billy just like a magnet for abuse or is he taking up for you? You know, like getting in Neil’s way just so he won’t touch you?” Max didn’t say anything for a moment, and then nodded. “So in a way, he’s protecting you, knowingly?”

“I guess so. It’s not like he treats me any better, though. He’s still a major dick.”

“I’m not defending him, but I am glad he’s protecting you. I still despise him, though.”

“You and me both. I don’t know where he goes when he’s gone like this.”

“He’s not going to see his mom?” Mike asked. Max snorted.

“His mom ditched him with Neil. I don’t blame her for leaving Neil, but she shouldn’t have just up and left Billy like that.” Mike nodded in agreement.

That had been pretty much the end of that conversation, and the two continued doing homework.

Troy and James hadn’t really been seen around school after the fight, and Max heard a lot of girls whispering about Stacy- and they were

not good things. There were some decent people at the school, and they were not happy about Stacy spreading the news of the Wheeler family around.

Mike's fourteenth birthday was coming up on Thursday, and the boy hadn't said a word about it to anyone, not even El, who found out through Will, and decided to confront Karen and help plan Mike a birthday party on Saturday, but they'd still do a little something on his actual birthday.

Thursday, March 7, 1985

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY MIKEY!" Holly shrieked at the top of her lungs as she jumped on her brother's bed, startling both he and Rosie, who immediately started barking and running up and down the bed, her tail wagging so hard Mike could feel the wind from it in his face.

"Holy *shit* , Holly." Mike groaned, sitting up as she plopped down on her butt in front of him, a shit eating grin on her face.

"Happy birthday." she repeated, much quieter this time, and handed him a small wrapped box. There was a flash, and Mike gave his mom a deadpan look. She looked at him from behind the camera and grinned at him. He rolled his eyes and turned back to Holly.

"Thanks, Hols." he hugged her and she jumped off his bed, running down the hall. Karen put the camera on Mike's dresser and walked over to him as he threw his legs over the bed. She looked up and down at his bed and bit her lip.

"We really need to get you a new bed, huh?" she asked. He snorted.

"That's an understatement."

"Well, go on, open it!" she smiled at him. He sighed but smiled at her and undid the bow on the box, and unwrapped it. He opened the box, only to reveal a nicer, newer version of the watch that was sitting on his night stand now.

"Oh cool!" he exclaimed, pulling it out of the box and putting it on. "It fits better than my old one now.

“Yeah, I noticed it was getting a little tight on you.” she grinned. “Even though it really seems you’re getting skinnier.”

“Hey, I can’t help it.” he grumbled. She snickered and ruffled his hair.

“Growth spurts aren’t fun, I know. Once you *finally* stop growing, you might fill out some.” he huffed and stood up.

“Growth spurts *hurt* .”

Karen made a huge breakfast for Mike and his friends, who bombarded him with hugs and birthday wishes before he was even able to enter the kitchen. They’d made him silly birthday cards with three quarters in each envelope for when they go to the arcade later on after school.

“So I talked to El this morning.” Max said, waving around a fork full of pancake. Mike raised his eyebrows at her. “And she is currently having a meltdown over Elvis Presley.”

“Oh dear.” Karen chuckled, sipping her coffee.

“She told me that he was dead, as if it was the biggest shock of her life. Even asked if I’d get her a poster and another record next time I go to the record store.” Mike couldn’t help but grin.

“Have you not introduced her to Michael Jackson yet?” he asked.

“No, not yet.” she snickered. “But I think she’s stuck on Elvis for the moment.”

“Elvis was a beautiful man.” Karen sighed. “A pity that he’s gone. Beautiful man, beautiful voice.”

“Well then, I now know that my mother and girlfriend will be linking up to fangirl over a dead guy.” Mike rolled his eyes playfully and Karen swatted at him with her towel.

“You can’t tell me you don’t like his music.” she told him.

“I didn’t say all that now.” he snorted. “I just know I’ll be left in the

dust by you two."

"Awe, is the birthday boy jealous over Elvis the Pelvis?" Nancy grinned at him as she walked by, ruffling his hair.

"Oh my *God* ."

El did call Mike before he left for school to wish him a happy birthday, and mentioned her love for Elvis which she told him she'd talk to him about later when they saw each other.

School was alright, it could have been better if everyone wasn't judgmental assholes and stared at him and his friends.

Overall, he'd had a pretty good day, and it got even better when he got home and had a few birthday cards with cash in them, right along with El waiting at the kitchen table with a cake sitting in front of her, "Happy Birthday Mike!" was written on top in colorful, curvy writing, a bunch of candles on top.

Mike couldn't help but grin at his girlfriend as she hopped up, throwing herself at him and hugging him tight as she repeatedly told him happy birthday. The Wheelers and rest of the Party ate birthday cake and gave out a couple presents before Steve came by and picked the Party up, somehow managing to get all the teens in his car to take them to the arcade.

Hopper was allowing El to go this time, and Mike used a lot of his quarters to teach her PAC MAN, which she picked up on quickly and nearly got the highest score.

"Well shit, looks like Will and El are gonna be competing against each other." Dustin snickered. Will had the highest score at the moment.

"Why?" El asked.

"Because you're really good at the game and Will has the highest score right now." Mike explained to her.

"Oh. I don't mind." she shrugged and grinned at Will, who grinned

back. El grabbed Mike's hand and led him over to the claw machine and looked up at him. "Can you win this?" she asked. He raised a brow and pursed his lips.

"I can try." he said, grinning at her. She grinned back and rocked on her heels for a moment as he put the quarters in the slot. "Which one do you want?" she stood close to the glass and looked around at the stuffed animals. There were a few stuffed bears, a weird looking pig, a few different versions of a stuffed Yoda, a single stuffed Elmo and multiple others.

"Can you try for the purple starfish?" she asked. It was right on top and would be fairly easy to get. Mike nodded and smiled at her. It took three tries to get it, finally managing to grab it on the third try. El couldn't help but gasp and let out a laugh when she watched it drop. Mike grabbed it and handed it to her. "Thank you!" she hugged him and kissed him on the cheek, and rushed over to Max to show her, which made Max bet Lucas that he wouldn't be able to win her anything. She chose the stuffed Yoda, and he got to work.

Lucas didn't stand a *chance* at winning it.

13. Chapter 13

Summary for the Chapter:

> Steve and Jonathan don’t know how to move furniture up stairs, Hopper is The Best and loves Rosie with all his heart, and last but the absolute least, Ted makes an appearance and ruins everyone's good mood, but he gets what he deserves.

Notes for the Chapter:

> SURPRISE! Here’s another long ass chapter, but here’s that thing. It hasn’t even been a WEEK. Who am I??? H o w did I manage this? The world may never know, but I hope you guys enjoy!
> P.S. Mike sings the whole song, but I don’t put all the lyrics :D

Saturday, March 9, 1985

"Come on boys, it's not that hard to do!" Karen clapped her hands at Steve and Jonathan, who were currently hauling a mattress up the stairs. The two paused to look down at her. She was standing next to the railing of the stairs, hands on her hips.

"Mrs. Wheeler, with all due respect, this is not at all *easy*." Steve huffed.

"You boys can figure it out! Come on, chop chop! Lucas and Dustin can't keep Mike occupied for long, because those two will drive him nuts." she walked off into the kitchen and Steve looked down the side of the mattress at Jonathan, who snorted.

"Where's El when you need her?" Jonathan asked.

"Right?" Steve agreed.

"El isn't here, she and Nancy are going to get balloons and Mike's cake, but if you move the mattress closer to the wall and ya know, lift up the front of the mattress Steve, as you go up, it will be a lot

easier!" Max called from the living room, where she was playing with Holly. Steve made a fart noise at her.

"It wouldn't hurt to try though." Jonathan suggested. Steve mumbled under his breath but they did what Max suggested and he lifted up and pulled as he walked up the stairs. It was one hundred percent effective but he wasn't gonna tell her that.

Ten minutes later, the two couldn't for the life of them figure out how to put the stanky frame together.

"Why in the *hell* are beds so difficult to put together?" Steve exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air.

"Never fear, I am here." Hopper said in a deadpan voice as he walked into the room. He looked at the two on the floor, Steve sitting at the foot of the bed, Jonathan at the head, the mattress and boxspring leaning against one of Mike's dressers. "You two should not be trusted with this kids bed frame. Or in his room. At all."

"We've never *done* this." Steve whined. Jonathan leaned back against the wall and looked at Hopper.

"How do you do this?"

"You two are smart-" Hopper stopped himself, thought for a second, and corrected himself. "Byers, you're smart, you should be able to figure this out."

"Hey!" Steve huffed and crossed his arms. "Rude." he heard Max cackling down the hall.

"Here's what you do- there's two settings on this one. For a full mattress, or a queen size. Obviously, you've gotta do the one for a full size. That means, the notches go into the second hole, on each side. They've got to snap in there, otherwise, the second Wheeler sits on the bed, everything will immediately hit the floor."

"Well you do it then." Steve hopped up and gestured to the frame. He helped Jonathan up and they got out of Hopper's way, and he had it done in less than five minutes.

"See." Hopper pointed at each connecting spot. "Not that hard."

"Oh frick you." Steve grumbled. "Let's put the other shit on it and get outta here." Hopper snickered and left the room, letting the two sort the rest out.

Nancy and El were back, and the two, along with Will and Max, are taping balloons to random places. Joyce was helping Karen in the kitchen.

"That… is a lot of balloons." Hopper commented.

"When we were younger we used to like to poke little holes in the balloons and let them fly around the room. They'd sound like they were screaming sometimes. It's kind of a tradition, we do it for everyone's birthday." Will told him.

"Ah, gotcha."

"That's why we didn't blow a pack of them up. To do that specifically." Nancy added. Hopper snorted and nodded, joining the women in the kitchen. Holly realized that they were back and ran to hug El, nearly knocking her over in the process. Nancy laughed and shook her head, continuing to tape up the balloons.

"Smelling good in here, ladies!" Hopper announced his presence, making Joyce nearly fall out of her seat and whip around to face him.

"Dammit Hopper, do you have to be so *loud*?" she asked. He snickered and sat down next to her.

"Have they figured out the bed?" Karen asked him.

"I had to do the frame for them, but I think they've got the rest figured out."

"Thank you," she chuckled, "I'm gonna go make the bed, when the timer goes off, will one of you take that out of the oven for me?" she asked. The couple nodded and she made her way up the stairs.

"What's in the oven?" Hopper asked.

"Baked mac and cheese." Joyce told him.

"Oh."

A few minutes after Karen finished making up Mike's new bed, he, Dustin and Lucas arrived, Rosie barking when she saw Hopper. As soon as Mike let her off the leash, she ran to him and practically jumped in his lap.

"Awe, Rosie, leave the man alone." Nancy came into the room and went to grab Rosie- even as big as she was now- off Hopper, who shook his head and hugged the dog.

"Oh no, I'm loving this. It's much better than that damned cat at the cabin, with those tiny little demon claws." she snorted.

"Alright then." she walked back into the living room and joined Jonathan. On the couch.

"Eggo is not a demon!" El exclaimed, smacking Hopper with his own hat. From twenty feet away. Mike snickered and walked over to his girlfriend, wrapping an arm around her.

"Yeah Hop, Eggo is just a sweet, giant fluff ball."

"Damn cotton ball." Hopper muttered, and went back to scratching behind Rosies ears.

"The food is almost ready, Michael, go grab your friends." Karen told him.

"Where even are they?" he asked, and he and El walked out of the room without an answer.

"Don't go in your room yet!" she called after him. He poked his head back in and made a face at her.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I said so." she replied, raising an eyebrow at him. He scrunched his nose up at her. "One of your birthday presents is in there and you can't see it til later."

"Why?"

"Go get your friends." she threw the rag in her hands at him. He let out a groan and ducked, popping back out of the room.

Mike actually listened to his mother for once, and didn't go into his room- mostly because he knew El was in on it and she would *not* let him go inside if he tried.

Everyone ate together before the teens went down to the basement to continue a game of D&D, and an hour or two after that, Karen called them all back upstairs so Mike could blow out the candles.

Half way through Mike's *second* slice of cake, there was a loud knock at the door. Mike furrowed his eyebrows, knowing that everyone that was coming was here, no one was late or missing.

Karen stood up from her seat and answered the door, a complete feeling of hatred falling over her at the sight in front of her. Ted.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"I'm here to get the rest of my things." he replied, arms crossed over his chest.

Upon hearing his father's voice, Mike put his fork down and pushed the half eaten slice away from him. His friends looked at him and at each other, curious to see if he'd do or say anything.

"It's in trash bags in the garage. I'll be right back." she turned on her heel and stormed down the hall to the garage door. Ted walked further inside the house, looking around at all the balloons, stopping only when he noticed the kitchen was full of people, a cake sitting on the table and presents on the floor in the corner.

"Who's birthday is it?" he asked. Mike huffed and sat back in his chair, shaking his head whilst his friends immediately held their middle fingers up at him.

"Your son, dickhead." Dustin said, rolling his eyes.

"Langua-" Ted started, but Dustin interrupted

"You lost any ounce of respect from me the moment I found out how much of a piece of shit you were." the way Ted gasped was almost comical.

"How dare you speak to me this way, this is *my* house-"

"If I may interrupt, Theodore." Hopper stood from his seat and walked into the hallway. "This is Karen's house now. You have no business being in here as far as I'm concerned."

"Well, you're not concerned, Jim."

"It's Chief Hopper to you, Theodore."

"Just fucking leave. Is it not obvious to you that no one wants you here?" Mike asked, suddenly standing next to Hopper.

"You will *not* talk to me that way-"

"Oh boo hoo. You're not my dad, right? I'll talk to you however the *fuck* I want."

"Damn right you're not, and to think, I stayed with the cheating bitch-"

"Excuse *me*?" Nancy nearly shrieked, joining them in the hall. "Did he just?" she looked at her brother and pointed at their father.

"He did. Are you really that *stupid*?" Mike let out a laugh. "You really think you can call her that? You had an entire FUCKING FAMILY, before Nancy was even *born!* So don't you *dare* call my mother a cheating bitch again."

"What'll you do about it then? Hm? You're worthless, Michael." Mike heard a few gasps come from the kitchen, and he felt his heart pounding in his chest. He could feel the heat rising to his ears.

"You don't know what I'm capable of, and you *don't* want to know. Fuck you." Mike stormed past his father and shoved him harshly into the wall. Ted went to grab him, but Hopper was already there to stop

him, and Mike continued his way to the basement.

"What were you about to do there, huh, Theodore?" Hopper growled.

"Get your hands *off* me."

"Let him go, Hop." Karen demanded. Hopper looked back at her, and just by the look on her face he knew to listen to her. He let Ted go and Karen dropped the bags at her feet.

Before Karen had a chance to start anything, El walked out of the kitchen, her face tilted down slightly, eyes gazing up at Ted, rage clearly visible in her face. Holly was hiding behind El until they reached the doorframe, and instead of following her out the door, she hid behind the wall, barely peeking out to look at the group in the hall.

"I'd like to say something, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Oh, the little girl would like to-"

"Shut up." Ted's mouth immediately closed and he couldn't open it again. El walked closer to Ted, almost sizing him up.

"You don't deserve to be called Mike's dad. You don't deserve to know him. You will not *ever* speak to him again the way you have today. You will not speak a word to Mrs. Wheeler again. You will not talk bad about her." Ted's eyes widened as he realized he physically couldn't open his mouth, and he began backing away slowly. He looked to El's right and saw his oldest daughter stand next to El, her fists balled tightly.

"If I ever, *ever*, hear you call mom a cheating bitch, or a cheater again, I might just kill you. You think you're the only one that's gotten away with hiding secrets." Nancy chuckled, shaking her head. "You're not. You better hope and pray that you don't find out what these secrets are, because you're very close to finding them out, and you'll be one unlucky son of a bitch when you do." she said her part, and stormed past her father in a similar fashion as her brother, following him down into the basement.

Karen picked up each bag and threw it at Ted as hard as she could,

until he was pushed up against the wall.

"Call me a cheating bitch again,Ted, I dare you! Go ahead, do it." she growled.

"Do you really not realize how stupid you are?" Max asked, leaning against the door frame.

"I am *not* stupid-" he was able to speak again.

"See? You're stupid for thinking you're not stupid!" Lucas yelled from the kitchen. El continued to glare at Ted, and every time he glanced at her, he backed away bit by bit.

"I don't know what game you people are trying to play at, but this *child* doesn't scare me."

"Oh really? Then why do you backup every time you look at her?" Hopper grinned smugly. "Does anyone else have anything they'd like to say to old Theodore here before I escort him out?"

Surprisingly, Holly stepped out from her hiding place, tears in her eyes, and pointed at her father, "I hate you!"

"Holly-" Ted started to reach for her but she rushed over to Max to be picked up. Max hugged Holly tight as Holly buried her face in Max's hair. She glared at Ted and turned away from him. His eyes narrowed.

"This whole family is a disgrace!"

"They're a disgrace, you say?" Joyce stepped out now, ready and willing to put it on his sorry ass. "How? Do you know how astoundingly stupid you sound? I mean really, if anyone's a disgrace, it's you. You stand here in the house you paid for, for twenty years, and yet you've lost it. You have lost the best people in your life. Calling your wife, your eighteen year old daughter, fourteen year old son, and five year old daughter, a disgrace, when it's you." Joyce rambled off, barely taking a breath as she spoke.

"Whether you like it or not, you're biologically a part of that family, so technically, you're calling yourself a disgrace, asshole." Steve spit

at him.

"Calling them a disgrace is only a lousy way to make yourself feel better, Theodore. You might wanna shut up and get out before you get your ass handed to you." Hopper said, his word final.

There was a chorus of "Fuck you's" as Ted picked up his bags.

"Alrighty then, get the fuck out." Hopper shoved Ted towards the door.

"Hey dad?" El called quietly. He glanced back at her and they looked at each other for a second, and he gave a slight nod and continued behind Ted. As soon as Ted was out of the house, El flicked her head up and Ted fell face first into the snow. The door slammed shut and Lucas, Max and Dustin couldn't help but giggle.

When Hopper and Ted reached Ted's car, and the bags were placed in the trunk and the trunk closed, Hopper punched Ted directly in the nose.

"If I *ever* hear you say a single word out of line about your ex-wife or children again, I'll make you regret it, ya hear? Stay out of my line of *sight* as long as you're in this town too, why don't you? Or just leave town, it'll make everyone's lives a little better." Ted just stared at him. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Get the hell off this property."

"Oh Mike." Nancy whispered when she caught sight of her brother. He was pacing in front of the couch, his fingers knotted in his hair, breathing heavily. His eyes snapped towards her for a moment but he continued pacing. "Mike, he's about to leave." she told him, slowly walking closer to him. "Everyone's up their handing his ass to him."

"That doesn't make me feel any better, Nancy." he grumbled. He released his hair long enough to run his hands over his face, and then grabbed at his hair once again.

"I know, I'm sorry Mike. Come here, stop pacing-"

"I can't stop, Nancy." he looked at her then, and began walking circles around the coffee table. "Because if I stop, I'll just get mad. I'll wanna throw shit. I'll wanna cry and I'm so *fucking* tired of being mad and crying over his *bullshit*."

"I know, Mike. I know. But I can try and help you if you let me, okay? You shouldn't have to deal with any of this."

"No, you don't know." he stopped and looked at her, dropping his hands at his sides and balling his fists. "You've always been the perfect child. The perfect daughter."

"I am *not* perfect-"

"Yeah, yeah you *are*. In the eyes of a lot of people in this town you are *the perfect child*. Dad *never* talked to you or about you like he has me. He's never said one good thing about me and fucking lived to make my life miserable towards the end of he and moms bull fucking shit relationship!" Mike backed up until his back hit the wall. "I'm so tired of being upset and mad all the time, Nancy. I can't keep going on like this." he slid until he was sitting, hugging his knees to his chest. She could see the tears he was holding in shine in the light of the basement as he looked up at her. "I just… I can't." she slowly walked over to him and sat beside him. He was still breathing pretty heavily, trying to keep his tears at bay and Nancy's heart broke. She hated seeing her brother go through this. He didn't deserve it. She could just barely hear everyone talking shit to her father upstairs through the open door, and it was well deserved.

"I don't know what I can say to make you feel better." she said quietly.

"There isn't anything you can." he replied, resting his head on the wall. She did the same and sighed. They sat for a minute or two before she remembered the whole reason he ran down here. *How could I be so stupid and forget?* She chastised herself.

Nancy threw an arm around him and pulled him tight against her. "I do know what to say." she said confidently. "I should have said it as

soon as I saw you down here. You are *not* worthless, Mike. You're not. You are so good, so amazing. You're my little brother and the best big brother to Holly. You're my favorite person in the whole world."

Mike snorted and shoved at her. "*Whatever*." he scoffed.

"Okay, maybe not my all time favorite, but you're one of them!" she said. "But anything that horrible excuse for a man has ever said to you means *nothing. Nothing*, Mike. Understand?" he let out a sigh and gave her a small nod as two sets of footsteps thundered down the stairs.

"Mike I hope you ignored every single word that good for nothing piece of shit said." Karen said immediately, then she spotted the two on the floor and rushed towards them. El was the second set of footsteps but she hung back to let the mother fuss over her son. Karen knelt in front of him. "I'm so sorry that this happened, I should have never let him come inside, or at least have his crap delivered to him so he wouldn't even come back."

"Mom, it's not your fault." Mike told her. He'd calmed down some by now. He was still incredibly upset and mad at his dad, but there wasn't much he could do about it now, was there?

"It is, Mike. I should have done something. I shouldn't have left him in there with everyone like that."

"Mom, stop." Nancy shook her head. "It's not your fault. We don't blame you, none of us do. Right Mikey?" she bumped up against him, removing her arm from around him. He rolled his eyes but nodded, looking at his mom.

"I've never blamed you for the way he's acted mom. And I never will." he said. "But I personally would like to try and get back to the fun before I start getting pissed and upset again."

"Yes! Right, yes, let's get your mind off it, shall we. Girls, should we show him his birthday present?" Karen asked, standing and looking at her daughter and sons girlfriend. They smiled and nodded. Karen moved out of the way as Nancy got up, and El finally walked over

and held her hands out to her boyfriend, who gladly took them and she pulled him to his feet. She immediately pulled him into a hug and Nancy and Karen went upstairs to give them a moment.

"Are you sure you're okay?" El asked him. "We can stay down here for longer if you want to."

"I'm as okay as I can be." he told her honestly. "It sucks but… I know you guys don't think the same as him and that's all that matters." she smiled at him. "Plus, if we stayed here too long the guys would start thinking all gross and make fun of us when we go back up."

"Gross?" she asked. "Why?"

Mike felt his cheeks heat up again. "Oh, um, no reason. Let's go upstairs and see my present?" he changed the subject quickly. She furrowed her brows for a second but shook his odd behavior off and nodded, smiling at him.

"You're really gonna like it." she told him, grabbing his hand and pulling him with her. He laughed and followed her.

When they got back upstairs, the only people there were Joyce and Hopper, who were sitting at the kitchen table, grinning at the two almost suspiciously.

"You two aren't creepy at all?" Mike asked, giving them a weird look. They just shrugged and watched El pull him down the hall and up the stairs. "Where is everyone?" he asked but El didn't reply. She just used her powers to open the door and gently pushed Mike in the doorway.

Suddenly, at least ten rogue balloons flew at Mike, squealing. He let out a shriek and tried to hit some of them as everyone else laughed at his reaction.

"Surprise!" they exclaimed in unison, parting so that he could see his present.

"Holy-" he walked into his room, almost slipping on a fallen balloon, gaze locked on the brand new double bed sitting where his bunk used to be. "Oh shit- this is *mine*?" he asked.

"It sure is." Karen told him, smiling at him.

"You should really try it out dude, it's super comfy." Steve commented. Mike looked at him weird.

"First of all, why were you on my bed? And second, why are you in my *room*."

"First of all, shit head, I helped put this sucker together-"

"All you and Jonathan did was complain about how hard it was to get the mattress and boxspring up here like the idiots you two are." Max rolled her eyes. "And Hopper put the frame together because you are *idiots*."

"Tell 'em." Dustin whispered to Will, who laughed.

"Anyways…" Mike muttered, and crawled onto the bed, spreading his limbs out starfish style just in time for Rosie to join the group in the room, jumping on the bed and lying next to Mike, resting her head on his arm. He snorted and scratched behind her ears. "This is awesome. Thanks, mom."

"You're welcome sweetie. Why don't we all go downstairs and open the rest of your gifts?" Karen suggested, and everyone ran down the stairs, excited to give Mike their presents.

Lucas, Will and Dustin all pitched in and got him a few comics he'd been wanting- he could actually have them as long as he promised to share them, according to Dustin.

Max got him a notebook with funny and weird stickers, words and doodles all over it, "I did all that myself." she said, grinning at him. "Flip to the last page." he raised an eyebrow at her and did, immediately turning red and slamming it shut, smacking her repeatedly with it until Hopper barked at him to stop, to which Mike replied with smacking him once jokingly.

"What'd she write?" Dustin asked, eyebrows raised.

"Nothing." Mike muttered and literally slid the notebook up under him so that he was sitting on it and no one else could get a hold of it.

El didn't know what to get him, so she made him a card and had Hopper go out and buy him a random action figure. It was a WWE wrestler and he had no idea who it was, but he was going to add it to his collection.

Mike didn't even notice his mom go back upstairs after he opened all of his gifts, but he did notice the envelope Nancy handed him. He raised an eyebrow and took it from her. He opened it and pulled out a birthday card that had a ten dollar bill in it.

Happy birthday, ya tall awkward lover boy. Love, Nancy.

Mike rolled his eyes at her but couldn't help the smile on his face.

"Thanks, Nance." he told her. She grinned at him. He started to put the card back in the envelope when something fell out. He picked it up and saw that it was a guitar pick. He looked at her, confused.

"Surprise, Mikey." his mom said and he turned to look at her, and she was standing in the doorway with a guitar in hand, a blue ribbon stuck on the side of it. His jaw dropped as he looked at her. She smiled at him. He stood up and walked over to her quickly.

"Is that...?" he asked. She nodded.

"Grandpa wanted you to have it, and Nana just found it." she told him. He took the guitar from her, admiring it.

"I don't know what to say." he said quietly. She smiled and squeezed his shoulder gently.

"You don't have to say anything." she assured him.

"I think," Nancy started, "that you should play us a little something." he turned around and looked at her, and saw the biggest grin on her face. He rolled his eyes but nodded, and sat back down beside El, who looked at the guitar with the weirdest face he's ever seen.

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's a guitar." he told her. "It makes music. See?" H=he ran his fingers across the strings and it made a sound, and she jumped,

causing everyone to laugh.

"Not good music." she told him. He chuckled, and picked up the pick he'd dropped, and played a few chords. She raised an eyebrow at him. "Good music." She decided and he chuckled again.

"I didn't know you could play guitar." Hopper said. Mike shrugged.

"It never came up in conversations." he said. "I don't know a lot, just what my grandpa taught me."

"I'll teach you." Steve piped up. Mike raised an eyebrow.

"You play guitar?" Dustin asked. Steve nodded.

"It's not that big of a secret, dipshit."

"Can you not call me a dipshit?"

"Nah, you're a dipshit so I'm gonna call you a dipshit." he looked at the rest of the party. "Same with you shitheads."

"Are we shitheads or dipshits?" Lucas asked. Karen rolled her eyes and sat on the couch next to Nancy. Steve chuckled and looked at Mike,

"Both, now, I promise I won't break your guitar, can I play a bit?"

It wasn't long after that that Hopper forced everyone to head home, because it was getting dark and beginning to snow and he didn't want anyone out in it any longer than necessary. After everyone left, Karen got Holly ready for bed and Mike fed Rosie and then helped Nancy pick up the balloons that fell from their tapped spots.

"Mike, Holly wants you!" Karen called from the stairs. Mike huffed and put the balloons he had in his hands in a trash bag and made his way upstairs. "I'm gonna go work in the kitchen." she told him. It was a disaster area there. He nodded and continued up the stairs.

"Hey Hols, what's up?" he asked. He heard Nancy rush past Holly's bedroom and into her own, and assumed she was going to call Jonathan.

"Will you play the rainbow song?" she asked sweetly. He made a face at her. "Kermit, the muppets." she added.

"Oh! I don't know, Hols, I feel like I'd ruin the song with my voice." he told her, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Nuh uh!" she shook her head, hugging her teddy bear. He laughed and nodded.

"Alright, alright, I'll go grab my guitar and I'll sing it for you." he told her.

"Thank you!" she grinned at him. He grinned back and quickly got his guitar, and sat at the end of her bed. He coughed dramatically, warming up, and began picking at the strings. Holly squealed a little and wiggled until she was comfortable, watching her big brother play his guitar.

"*Why are there so many songs about rainbows, and what's on the other side. Rainbows are visions, they're only illusions, and rainbows have nothing to hide*." Mike sang, picking at the guitar strings, playing the very familiar tune. It was one of the few songs his grandpa taught him. "*So we've been told and some chose to believe it, but I know they're wrong wait and see*."

Karen couldn't help but place her hands over her heart as she heard her son singing to her youngest daughter. It was a very rare occurrence and she loved it. She'd come up to ask Nancy a question, but immediately forgot what it was and quietly walked past Holly's room and to Nancy's, and said girl was lying on her bed, on the phone with Jonathan already. She knocked on the door frame and when Nancy looked at her, she motioned for here to come to her. Nancy told Jonathan to give her a minute and Karen had Nancy follow her down the hall and listen to Mike. Nancy awes quietly and grinned at her mom.

"*Someday we'll find it, the Rainbow Connection. The lovers, the dreamers and me*."

14. Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

> This chapter is long overdue, nowhere near as long as I'd like and incredibly choppy and goes by quite fast, but the next chapter starts something a bit promising, I think. I think you'll all enjoy it! It definitely won't have a ton of time skips like this chapter did, but I have a point to make. Kind of.
>
> I have a new job, I've officially been there for two months and like normal, only get two days off, but it seems like I barely have any time to write. I work at a pizza place, so you can only imagine how chaotic it is, but I have a new best friend and I've had more fun with her the last two months than I've ever had with friends I've known for years.
>
> A lot of things have happened since the last update for this story, but I'm not going to get into them right now, I just want to apologize for taking so long to update. I am still a big part of the fandom and am very excited for Season 4, and hope to be posting more often soon! I have another little something in the works, that I've been working on for a while now with another very talented writer, so that's something!
>
> Also yes, I switched the title back to Home. I just had to!
>
> Enjoy!

Saturday, March 16, 1985

"I think he likes this bed a little too much." Steve muttered to Jonathan, who nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, it's after one o'clock. Think we should wake him up?"

Jonathan asked. Steve nodded. The two looked at the sleeping boy, stretched out in his new bed.

“I kinda feel bad about waking him up, actually.” Steve lifted a hand and rubbed his chin, as if thinking. “Oh well.” he promptly let his body fall right on top of the younger teen.

Steve nearly got kicked in the head- how, he doesn’t know- but it was worth it hearing the young teen shriek and then the laughter that followed with it.

Rosie barked and jumped on the bed too, wagging her tail as Steve moved off of Mike and lied on his side as Mike rolled over and sat up.

“You’re an ass.” Mike grumbled, scratching his head and slouched, looking up at Jonathan and jumping as if just noticing he was there. “ *Why* are you two in my house.”

“You’re not gonna ask why we’re in your room?” Steve asked, furrowing his brows at him. “Because I’d be worried about that- wouldn’t you, Jon?” Jonathan nodded in agreement.

“No, I know why you’re in my room. To ruin my morning-”

“Ah ah ah!” Steve waggled a finger in Mike’s face and Mike slapped his hand. “It’s after one o’clock in the afternoon, young man.”

“Shit, really?” Mike squinted at the clock beside his bed. “That still doesn’t tell me why you two are in my house. Did mom let you in?”

“Mama Karen fed us and everything.” Steve said.

“Yeah, and she just made lunch, which you’re going to miss out on if you don’t get up.” Jonathan added.

“ *Still* doesn’t tell me why you’re here.”

“Ugh, must you be so… I don’t know what word to use. But stop asking questions and get your ass up.” Steve nearly fell off the bed in his haste to get up. Mike face palmed and he heard Steve’s footsteps as he left the room.

“In all seriousness,” Jonathan said, stopping by the door. “We want to go out and do something. The last few weeks have been, well… You know, and we just wanna do something fun.”

“Just us three?” Mike asked, scrunching his nose. Jonathan snorted.

“Yeah, just us. Steve wants to be nosey and go see how the new mall is coming along.”

“Of course he does.” Mike rolled his eyes. “I’ll be downstairs in a few.” he told the older teen, who nodded and left the room.

Karen, of course, fussed at her son for sleeping so late, but had lunch with the three teens and Holly, before sending them off to do their own thing, while she and her youngest child went out to run their own errands.

“So what are we doing?” Mike asked. “Besides just driving past the mall.” he added.

“Well, the mall is *almost* finished anyways, and I wanna apply for some jobs there.” Steve told him.

“How are you going to do that?”

“Newspaper, of course.” Steve told him. “You gotta contact a number on the ad and then they’ll contact someone to contact you, and you go from there.” Steve replied.

“Is that really how it works?” Mike asked, furrowing his brows. Jonathan looked back at Mike from the passenger seat.

“Pretty sure it’s not.” Jonathan whispered to him. “But we’re gonna let him figure it out for himself.”

They drove by the mall five times before heading to the library, where Steve insisted it was the best place for a newspaper, as well as telling the two that it was pretty much Mike’s second home.

“You do know the only reason I come here is for school work, right? I never come here during the summer. That’s Dustin.”

“Oh yeah true.”

“I don’t think he’s allowed in the library until August.” Mike said. “After the paddles incident.”

“The what?”

The three walked up to the front desk, and Steve grinned at the librarian before him. “Hello, I was wondering if the newspaper would have ads for jobs at the new mall?” he asked. “I’ve heard a few people talking about it, and decided to see for myself.”

“No newspapers, no.” she replied. “There’s a board over there with applications, though. You can check those out.” she pointed to the board on the wall by the entrance.

“Oh shit, we’re all blind.” Mike snorted.

“I thought you knew everything about jobs in the newspaper.”

“I was just pulling you guys’ legs.” Steve snickered. “Anyways, thank ya ma’am! Come along children.” he walked to the application board.

“I’m a year younger than you.” Jonathan said.

“I’m almost as tall as you.”

“But you’re younger than me, shit head.”

“Wow, a perfect argument.” Mike rolled his eyes.

“Thank you! Now help me get one of each application.”

“Christ.”

“Okay but I think it’s *so* stupid that you have to be at least sixteen to scoop ice cream cones.” Mike deadpanned. “ *Ice cream cones.* I mean come on, Holly can almost make her own ice cream. Granted she can’t eat it without getting it in her hair, but still, what the hell.” Mike dropped his pencil in the middle of the text book and looked up at his girlfriend, who was staring at him, her brows furrowed. “Like

what if I had to get a job to help my mom out? I couldn't do it!"

"But… Nancy is older than sixteen. She can get a job." El said. "Can't she?"
"Well… yeah, but Jonathan said something earlier today about applying for an internship with the newspaper. He saw an ad for it while we were at the library." he added.

"Does Nancy like the newspaper?" El asked. She knew that Jonathan did, but never thought about Nancy. Mike shrugged.

"I guess, she wants to be a journalist in the future."

"Journalist?"

"A person who writes for newspapers or magazines," he told her.

"Oh." she nodded.

"Okay, okay, I'm supposed to be helping you study. Where are we?" he asked.

"Page two hundred and seventy-eight." she said. "The p- um…. Pie-, no. I don't know how to say it."

"Pythagorean theorem." he told her, flipping to the page and seeing the title. "We're already on the Pythagorean theorem?" he asked, looking at her. She nodded and showed him her second notebook of the seventh grade math lessons. The first one ranges from number theory to number sequences, and she's almost finished with the second one. "Wow, I guess we are."
"Pythagorean theorem." she repeated slowly.

"You said that better than the first time I did." Mike snorted. She smiled at him. "Well, we're gonna breeze right through it, it's one of the easiest courses in middle school." he told her. "There are some pretty big words, though. So, the Pythagorean theorem is when there is a length missing to a triangle…" El listened intently as he explained what the next thirty minutes would be about, and wrote down nearly everything he said.

Which is why she's on her second notebook.

After math was an hour of science before Hopper arrived to pick her up at five thirty.

“What did you learn about today?” Hopper asked.

“Social studies and English was boring.” she said. “But math and science were good. I learned about the Pythagorean theorem- Mike says it’s the easiest math course in seventh grade. And fossils. Fossils are really cool.” she told him. Hopper nodded.

“Fossils are pretty cool. I was into social studies though when I was in school.”

“You learned different things though. Probably more interesting.”

“I don’t know about that, kid. I’m sure you’re learning the same stuff I did, and more, considering it’s been well over twenty years since I had a history class.” El raised her eyebrows at him. “What? I’m old.”

“You’re forty two. That’s not old.”

“Tell that to my back.” he snorted.

“Okay.” she turned back to her notebook- the science one this time- and flipped to the first page.

When she has free time, that’s all she does- goes through her notebooks, underlines important things over and over, soaking it all in. She’s determined to go to school with her friends, and she has around four months to finish learning everything she can in the rest of seventh grade and all of eighth.

Friday, March 29, 1985

“Natural selection.” Lucas said, pointing at the section in the textbook. “Natural selection is the process where organisms that are more adapted to their environment normally survive. Basically, natural selection, is when the dummer of the species dies out from doing stupid things. For example, Steve Harrington and his nail bat. Or Dustin in general.”

“For example, men.” Max called from the living room.
“Shut up!” Lucas called back, grumbling under his breath. El laughed. “But without natural selection, there would be no evolution. You remember talking about evolution, right?”

“Yes. When different organisms develop further. Like humans and technology.”

“Good.” he grinned at her. “After this lesson, there are only two more until your exam to see if you can move on to the next grade.” El nodded.

“I have them all written down. One more for social studies, one more for math, and two for english.”

“You’ll probably get those done by Wednesday, honestly,” he told her. “Next week is spring break, so we have the entire week off school.”

“Don’t you want a break?” El asked. “From school work?”

“I don’t mind helping you at all, El. None of us do. Right, Max?”

“Not at all! I can’t wait for you to come to school with us.” Max said, making her way into the kitchen. “The real question is, do *you* want to take a break? You’ve literally been working nonstop since November. You’ve gotten through nearly two grades since then.”

“I want to finish.” she told them. “I’ll take a break when I finish this grade.” she said, the tone of voice telling them she wasn’t going to argue.

“Alright then,” Lucas chuckled. “Let’s get this started, shall we?”

Wednesday, April 17, 1985

Sadly, El didn’t finish the seventh grade during Spring break, but rather, the week after. Dustin and Max managed to convince her to take a couple days off from studying to hang out with them. Mike too, of course, but he knew how important it was for her, but he was glad to get to spend more time with her. She also got to experience

her first real Easter- although she didn't attend church, she learned a lot from Mike's mom, helped decorate Easter eggs, and she and Holly hunted for eggs that the rest of the party hid for them. She *also* learned that hard boiled eggs were disgusting.

She finished last Thursday, and she's going to take the four exams on Monday and Tuesday of next week, at the middle school after school is over for the day.

At the moment, she was lying on her back on the couch at the cabin, with Eggo curled up on her thighs as she flipped through her social studies notebook. Hopper wasn't home yet, he wouldn't be for a few more hours. Mike and Max were coming over after school to help her study, and study for their own exams coming up.

Hopper, however, was doing something much more difficult. He was seated at his desk, leaning so far back in his chair that he could tip over any second, while his girlfriend stood in front of his desk, arms crossed over her chest as she stared at him.

"Hopper, it is a normal thing to go through-"

"Well, can you do it? You know more about it than me."

"You're also her father." she rolled her eyes.

"And you're a woman!"

"Jesus Christ, Hop. Really? You're scared of a *period* ?"

"I-well, yeah. It means you're becoming a woman, and, well…"

"You're not ready?" she asked. He shrugged and looked away from her.

"I never got the chance with Sara," he said. "So I have no idea what to expect. And I really don't think I'm the best fit for this situation." He side eyed her. She rolled her eyes again. *This man is more afraid of a little menstrual cycle than he is of a damn gun* , she thought.

"We've been needing to discuss this with her since *Christmas* . Do you really want the poor girl to start bleeding out of nowhere and be in

pain and not understand why? *Especially* if she's by herself?" Hopper sighed.

"I know, I know-"

"And imagine if it happened when the boys were around? She and the boys would all be scarred for life!"

That's what got Hopper going, and he sat up straight in his chair.

"You're right. That wouldn't go down well."

"No, it wouldn't."

Joyce knew that the main thing he was worried about was "The Talk" and she wasn't even referring to that in the slightest. This is "A Talk" but not "The Talk."

"You don't have to worry about the sex talk, Hop, I'm not talking to her about that yet. But who knows, she might know about all this by now and just hasn't mentioned it." she shrugged and barely held in a laugh at the way his eyes popped out of his head.

"How could she know about it?" he asked.

"Max, maybe?" she shrugged again, "they're in middle school, and that's normally when health class starts."

"You don't think Red would do that though, do you?" he asked.

"No." Joyce chuckled. "I'm just pulling your leg, Hop. You of all people know that if El knew *anything* about that, she'd be asking one of us about it."

He let out a breath. "You're right." he said.

"Of course I am."

After Joyce left a few minutes later, Callahan walked in, eyebrows raised and grinning.

"Women just *have* to be right, you know?"

“Don’t come in here talking that talk.” Hopper rolled his eyes. Callahan snorted.

“I’m not talking shit, Chief. Women just want to be right in arguments they start.”

“That’s because she’s usually right.” Hopper retorted. “Aren’t you supposed to be doing paper work on the crazy naked guy that passed out in the Sylvester's front lawn?”

Wednesday, April 24. 1985

El passed every one of her tests with flying colors, and even the school administrator- who administered the tests- stated that he wholeheartedly believed she’d be ready to start high school in the fall, as long as she got her work for eighth grade done over the summer. Everyone knew she’d be done by then, and celebrated that night at the cabin with pizza and sweets that Karen made for her.

Eggo made sure to make her presence known in the small cabin by running around everyone, jumping on them and then onto the next, even going as far as trying to climb up the curtains again. She wasn’t even four months old yet, so she was still pretty small, but she did a *lot* of damage.

“Good lord, who gave the cat drugs.” Steve said, somehow managing to get the claws out of his shirt and hold her with one hand while she squirmed, trying to get out of his grip.

“She always does this.” El told him, covering her mouth as she chewed her pizza. “Around this time. Like a… schedule.”

“At least it’s not during the middle of the night.” Lucas said.

“Three in the morning- *every single morning.* ” Hopper griped. “I blame Wheeler for all of this.” Mike nearly choked on his pizza in his haste to correct Hopper.

“ *You* said *yes* !” he exclaimed, coughing a little.

“ *You* picked out the cat.”

“ *You* said yes!” Mike repeated, pointing at him. “You could’ve easily said no to getting a cat, but *no* , you said *yes* .”

“Don’t go getting all butthurt now, Mike.” Max teased and he threw pepperoni at her.

“Just wait- I already *know* that you demons will be having sleepovers when school is out. You’ll see exactly what I mean.” Hopper bit into his slice of pizza so harshly he heard his teeth snap together. El laughed, leaning into Mike and he looked down at her, smiling.

“He’s so *angry* .” he muttered to her.

“His face looks like a tomato.” she giggled back.

“A pepperoni.” he quipped and she laughed loudly, burying her face in his arm. He looked so proud to have made her laugh so hard, laughing with her.

“Mike isn’t that funny- why are you laughing so hard?” Lucas asked, making a face at them. The two just giggled together.

“They’re ganging up on me.” Hopper grumbled, and Joyce rolled her eyes, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re talking about a cat like she’s human.”

“That little shit knows what she’s doing! That spray bottle doesn’t do shit!”

“She likes baths.” El said, calming down, letting out a couple small chuckles. “The water hitting her face isn’t going to work.” he grumbled to himself, taking another bite of his pizza.

“Are you going to take a break with your school work?” Will asked El, who shook her head.

“I’ve already got all of my work books.” she said. “I’m going to start tomorrow.”

“You have all summer, kid, and the rest of the school year. You can take a break.” Hopper told her. She shook her head again.

“I want to finish soon.” she said. “So I can take a break *before* I start school.” she explained.

“You’re gonna do incredible, I know it.” Mike told her. “Just like you did with seventh grade, you’re gonna breeze through eighth.” she smiled sweetly at him. At that moment, Eggo decided to jump on El’s back, claws digging into her skin just a little- but at this point, she was used to it.

“Dang it, Eggo.” El muttered, wiggling a little and using her powers to pick the kitten up and place her on her shoulder correctly. The cat stayed in that spot, sniffing at El’s hair and licking at her chick.

“Do you ever get tired of that, kid?” Hopper asked, shaking his head. El shook her head.

“Used to it.” she replied. “Sometimes she sits on my head when I sleep. It’s weird.” Mike snorted. “She likes Mike’s hair.” and as if on cue, the kitten walked across El’s shoulders and closer to Mike, sniffing his hair and biting at it, tugging him towards her.

“Ow, you little asshole.” he muttered, picking the cat up and holding her up to his face. She meowed at him and put a paw on his nose. They had a staring test for a moment, and Mike immediately put her down when her pupils dilated, knowing that meant she was about to claw the hell out of him. She hopped in place weirdly, bowing up at him and then jumping sideways under the couch, and made the teens laugh.

“I love it when she does that.” Will laughed. “It’s so funny.”

“It really is.” Max snorted, nodding in agreement.

“Cat’s are so weird, man.”

Thursday, May 2, 1985

“Guys! Guess what!” Dustin exclaimed, skidding to a stop at the bike rack, where the rest of the group were waiting.

“What?” Will asked, curious.

“I’m going to science camp in June!” he grinned. “It’s only for a couple weeks, I leave the day after Steve graduates and then I’ll be back before the end of the month.”

“That’s awesome, dude!” Mike high fived him.

“Right? It’s gonna be awesome- my mom told me this morning before I left.” as they walked inside, he rambled on and on about the things he’d be making.

“Mr. Clarke! I’m going to science camp next month!” Dustin yelled as soon as he walked into the room, the rest of his friends going straight to their seats, shaking their heads at him. There were only a few other people in the room now, since there was a good fifteen minutes left until class actually started.

“Oh really? Are you excited?” he asked.

“Very!” He told him about how he’d be creating things, and told him, “I’ll be sure to show you what I make, even though we won’t be seeing each other next year.”

“Ah, yes. The dreaded end of middle school and onto high school talk.” Mr. Clarke clapped his hands together, and looked around at the rest of the group. “It has been my absolute pleasure teaching you kids- teens.” he chuckled at the glare he received from Mike. “You guys have changed so much over the last couple of years, and I’m very proud of you all, and I will miss teaching you next year.”

“You can’t just follow us? Didn’t that one english teacher do that last year?” Max asked.

“It’s not so easy.” Mr. Clarke sighed sadly. “She only teaches up to ninth grade, and doesn’t intend to go any higher than that, from what I hear. But always remember that you are more than welcome to come visit after school. You guys know the hours I’m here, and those won’t be changing any time soon.” he smiled at them all and went back to the front of the class to write something on the chalkboard as students began trickling in.

At lunch, Dustin continued going on and on about summer camp, and

while the others were incredibly happy for him, they kind of wanted to talk about something else.

“Jonathan got that internship at Hawkins Post.” Will said. “He got the call yesterday after school.”

“Nancy did too.” Mike added. “She wouldn’t stop talking about it last night, she’s really excited about it.”

“Jonathan is too. He’ll be developing pictures and stuff to start with, I think.”

“What’s Nancy doing?” Max asked. Mike shrugged.

“I don’t know. Kinda tuned her out.” he let out a snort when she kicked him under the table.

“You were thinking about El, huh?” Lucas made kissy faces at him and Mike shoved him. He almost slid off the bench and laughed. “Damn, Mike, been working out?”

“Shut up.” Mike grumbled, taking an annoyed bite out of his sandwich.

“Oh! Steve got that job at the ice cream place!” Dustin exclaimed. “He starts the weekend after he graduates.”

“I know,” Mike rolled his eyes. “He made sure to tell me as he drove past me on the way to school this morning.”

“Awe, you had to ride your bike?” Max cooed at him.

“As if you didn’t ride yours?” He made a face at her.

“I don’t *mind* riding my bike.” she replied.

“Neither do I.” he retorted.

“Then why are you complaining?”

“I’m literally not? What the hell?” he furrowed his brows and she let out a loud laugh, kicking his foot again.

“I’m just screwing with you, Wheeler, don’t get your panties in a twist.” he just made a fart noise at her in response.

“Has El already started on her new work books?” Will asked.

“Oh you know it.” Mike nodded. “She’s stubborn- she’s determined she’s gonna show us that she’ll get it done, and get it done quick.”

“Hell yeah, women get shit *done* .” Max clapped her hands once, slamming them down on the table, making Will’s apple nearly roll off the table.

“My apple!” he exclaimed, stopping it with both hands, and his fear for the apples safety had the entire table laughing.

Saturday, June 8, 1985

Graduation was Wednesday, and of course, Steve’s parents were a no-show, but he had a huge group of people screaming his name and clapping as he walked across the stage, proudly holding up his diploma. They celebrated with burgers at Benny’s and swimming in Steve’s pool for *hours* , which also was sort of like Dustin’s going away party, as he left the next morning, hugging all his friends as though he were going to be gone for a year.

“This is odd.” Lucas said, stretching his legs out on the floor of the cabin, wiggling his toes at Eggo.

“What?” Will asked.

“Dustin not being here,” he replied.

“Yeah, it’s too quiet.” Max agreed. “I’m so used to that idiot breaking awkward silences I don’t know how to have a normal human conversation anymore.”

“As if any conversation with Dustin was normal.” Mike called from the table, where he and El were hunched over books and index cards. El let out a snort and Max cackled.

“That is true, Wheeler.” she agreed.

“Pre-algebra is so *stupid* .” El huffed, smacking her head on the table, making the pencils roll. Mike chuckled.

“I know, but you’re just starting on it. It’ll get easier.”

“Says you.” she replied. “You’ve been doing it *all year* .”

“As quickly as you catch on to things, El, it’ll be so easy in a couple weeks. Don’t worry about it.”

“Letters and numbers shouldn’t go together.” she replied, completely ignoring his comment. “It makes *no* sense.” he smiled, biting his bottom lip and continued writing something on an index card.

That’s how it went for the next couple of hours. They lounged around, helping El with school or watching movies, eating all of Hopper’s snacks and playing with Eggo, who zoomed around the cabin as if she were running for dear life every few hours. It was good, it was fun. They were having fun.

If only it were going to last.

15. Chapter 15

Notes for the Chapter:

> So yes, season three of Stranger Things is being written into this story- only it's being rewritten in a few different ways. Mainly, I'm only going to be writing the things with the younger characters, like I have with the whole story. It'll still be pretty similar to the show, but it has a few of my own touches here and there!

Saturday, June 29, 1985

Mike and El sat on El's bed, facing each other, sneaking kisses here and there, listening to music as El worked on school. The radio was playing in the background.

El looked at her boyfriend for him to check her answer, and he pecked her on the lips before singing along to the radio,

" *And nobody wants to know you now* ," he grabbed her hands and moved them along with his. " *Nobody wants to show you* -!"

"Mike! Mike, stop! Stop!" El couldn't help but laugh as she covered his mouth with her hands. He pulled them off and shook them again.

" *So if you're lost and on your own* -!"

"Mike! Stop! Mike! Mike!"

"You can never surrender !"

"Stop!" she laughed.

"What, you don't like it?" he grinned at her.

"No!" she laughed again and kissed him.

In the living room, Hopper let out a huge burp and yelled,

“You two cool it in there! I’m trying to watch my show!”

“Yeah, yeah!” Mike called back, and turned the radio down a little, and let El continue her work until it was time for him to leave and meet up with the rest of their friends at the mall.

“You’re late.” Lucas grumbled, arms crossed. He, Will and Max were waiting by the bike rack.

“Sorry!” Mike said, hopping off his bike quickly.

“Again.” Lucas continued.

“We're gonna miss the opening.” Will said.

“Yeah, if you keep whining about it. Let's go!” Mike retorted.

"If you guys keep whining about it.” Lucas mocked

“Just stop talking, dude. Jeez.” Mike rolled his eyes. “And I didn’t even say *guys* !”

“Let me guess.” Lucas paused for a second, “you were busy.” he smacked his lips.

“Real mature, Lucas.” Mike rolled his eyes once again.

The group of teens made their way to Scoops Ahoy- passing by Lucas’ sister Erica in the process, which was always a hilarious encounter- where their favorite babysitter was working tonight.

Upon stepping up to the counter, Mike stared the short haired coworker of said babysitter in the eye as he rang the bell repeatedly.

“Hey, dingus, your children are here.” she called.

“Again, really?” Mike rang the bell again.

“You offered.” Lucas told him. Steve scoffed and motioned for them to follow him.

“Come on. I swear, if *anybody* hears about this-”

“We’re dead.” they chorused.

Once they were settled in their seats, Mike said,

“See? We made it.”

“Still missed the previews.”

“Still made it, fart face.” Max grinned at her boyfriend and he huffed. Someone shushed them and Will started handing out their snacks.

They watched intently for a few minutes, and suddenly the movie began to slow to a stop and everyone started shouting and the power went out completely.

“Awe man!” Will grumbled. “I wonder if it went out in the whole mall?” he asked, looking at Mike. Mike shrugged, stuffing his mouth with whatever candy he had in his hand. Will chuckled and rolled his eyes, squirming a little as he felt cool air on the back of his neck. *I must be under a vent* , he thought, rubbing at his neck.

Suddenly, the lights flickered back on and the movie was going again, and everyone in the theater cheered.

Sunday, June 30, 1985

“Do you have an obsession with being late to shit, Wheeler?” Max asked, shoving Mike as they walked side by side towards the cabin.

“You’re literally late too, Max.” he huffed.

“Yeah and? I’m usually on time for everything, what’s your excuse?”

“What’s *yours* ?” he retorted, shoving her back. “One, it’s the middle of the summer and we’re walking through the woods at eight in the damn morning, and two, I had to stop by Melvalds to buy supplies since *you guys* were too lazy to do it last night after the movie, and you know Mrs. Byers loves to talk.” he shook the bag of supplies in her face and she shoved him again, snorting. He used the paper board in his other hand to smack her, though the only damage it could really do was give her a gnarly paper cut. Which it didn’t, so when

she punched him in the arm as hard as she could after, it was only to be an ass.

“You guys are late!” Lucas yelled from the porch, where he, El and Will were sitting on the steps waiting.

“Yeah, yeah.” Mike grumbled, and looked at Max. “See, he said the *both* of us. Not just me.”

“Shut it, Wheeler.” she rolled her eyes.

“You have everything?” Will asked.

“Yes, I have everything.” Mike said, holding it out to him. Will gladly took it, ushering Lucas in front of him and towards the front door. El gave him her usual greeting of a bear-hug and a kiss, and greeted Max with a handshake the two have been coming up with, before entering the cabin themselves.

“This is Gold Leader, returning to base. Do you copy? Over.” Dustin huffed, repeating the line a couple more times into his supercom before switching it up, “This is goddamn Gold Leader-!”

“Dusty!” his mother exclaimed, shaking her head at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Relax, for goodness sake, Dusty.”

“They should be answering, I know I’m in range.” he grumbled.

“You’ve been gone for an entire month, Honeybun, maybe they just… forgot.”

Yeah, like that made him feel *any* better.

“Yeah, Mike definitely would.” he grumbled. “All wrapped up in his girlfriend.”

“Mike has a girlfriend?” she asked.

“What, no?” he looked at her, as if she shocked him, realizing what he said.

“But-”

“Oh look, there's a cat!”

For once, his mom's love for cats proved to be helpful.

His mom dropped him off at home and left again to pick up some groceries. He dropped his things on the floor of his room and walked up to the tank Yertle was in, and chuckled.

“Well, at least someone’s happy I’m home.”

He let out a loud shriek as his toy robot started whirring and beeping, his other belongings that made noise- only if you pressed a *button* - beginning to make noises as well and came out from their places in his closet.

Robots and vehicles started walking *out of his bedroom door* and down the hallway in a line- and all he could think to do was grab the hairspray off his desk in case he needed to use it as a weapon.

He stuck the now open spray can out of his bedroom first, before sliding into the hall, the toys making their way to the living room.

“It's just a dream. You're dreaming.”

The toys suddenly stop as soon as he’s entered the living room, and then, there are multiple noises coming from behind him and he screamed, turning around and spraying those behind it. Lucas started screaming as the hairspray burned his eyes, and everyone stumbled away from the line of fire, Mike pulling El behind him while she clung onto his arm, squinting and hoping it didn’t reach her eyes- or anyone else's.

While Max helped Lucas clean his eyes with the water in the kitchen, Dustin brought it upon himself to show the rest of his friends all his new inventions she made at camp.

“I call it... the Forever Clock. All right? Powered by wind. Very useful

in the apocalypse.” he shoved the weird windmill looking thing into Will’s arms and went onto the next thing. “Then, I give you… the Slammer!” he held up what seemed to be a mechanical hammer and moved it closer to Mike and El. Mike turned them away a little, a smirk forming on his face as he gave the hammer to Will, giggling a little. “Pretty neat, huh? But this… this is my masterpiece.” he let out a grunt as he dropped a heavy looking duffle bag in front of them, and they all crouched down to look at it.

“I would like you to meet,” he paused for dramatic effect, grinning, “Cerebro!”

“What exactly are we looking at here?” Mike asked, tilting his head slightly in confusion.

“An unassembled one-of-a-kind, battery-powered radio tower.”

“So, it's a uh, a ham radio?” Will asked. Dustin grinned at him.

“The Cadillac of ham radios. This baby carries a crystal-clear connection over vast distances.” he started doing weird motions with his hands as he explained. “I'm talking North Pole to South. I can talk to my girlfriend whenever and wherever I choose.”

“Girlfriend?” they chorused, looking at each other in shock, while Dustin grinned proudly.

He handed them each something to carry and marched out of his room, the other three scrambling to follow him.

“Wait, so her name is Suzie?” Mike asked. Dustin glanced back at him and nodded.

“Suzie with a "z". She's from Utah.”

“Girls go to science camp?” Will asked.

“Suzie does. She’s a *genius* .”

“Is she cute?” El asked.

“Think Phoebe Cates, only hotter.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“What’s going on?” Max asked, noticing the group rushing towards the front door.

“We’re going to talk to Dustin’s *girlfriend* .” Will said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Girlfriend?” they exclaimed, and followed, slamming the door behind them.

“Are we high enough yet?”

Max snorted at the phrasing.

“Cerebro works best at a hundred meters.” Dustin said, completely ignoring the comment.

“How the hell do you even know if this is a hundred meters or not?” Max grunted. Dustin ignored her and continued on.

“You know, I'm pretty sure people in Utah have telephones.”

“Yeah, but Suzie's Mormon.” Dustin explained.

“Oh, shit. She doesn't have electricity?” Lucas asked.

“No, that's the Amish.” Max corrected him.

“Oh.”

“What are Mormons?” Will asked.

“Super religious white people. They have electricity and cars and stuff, but…” Dustin shrugged, “since I'm not Mormon, her parents would never approve of our relationship.”

They finally reached the top, and the group of six put Cerebro up without many problems, thankfully, but they sat there for hours, Dustin trying to contact Suzie, and in between learned what everyone had been up to over the summer. Max and Lucas hung out a lot, going to the arcade and movies, the small skatepark that had opened

up, and the public pool when Billy wasn't there. Mike and El also hung out a lot, but that was nothing new, but Will was included a lot, and she'd gotten a lot of her work books done so far.

Suzie still wasn't answering, and Mike could tell Dustin was not only embarrassed, but seemed a little hurt by the fact.

"Isn't Utah like… two hours behind us?" Mike asked. Dustin nodded.

"Of course you would know that, Wheeler." Max snorted.

"Shut up." he rolled his eyes. "But she could be eating dinner right now or something, man, or she's not even home yet. You never know."

"Yeah, you're right." Dustin nodded.

"And as cool as she may be, I'm sure it's difficult to put this thing together by yourself." Mike continued.

"Yeah, it's probably gonna take her a little longer than us to put it up." Will joined it.

"I wouldn't sweat it, dude." Lucas smacked him on the back.

"If you don't hear from her tonight, just try again tomorrow." Max added. "There's more to life than stupid boys, you know? She's got a life too." it was a slight jab at Mike, and he silently flipped her off.

"Ugh, I know. Thanks guys. For not making fun of me."

"Oh we're still gonna make fun of you. Especially after she responds."

Nancy angrily grabbed the half eaten sandwiches and threw them into the trash can. She hated this job- no, she hated the *men* at this job. She wore blue rubber gloves that most would use only to wash dishes, to keep their hands from drying up because of the soap, and to keep from feeling the slimy, gross food left on plates and silverware. They made her hands sweaty and felt gross when she took them off, but she was *not* going to be touching the half eaten food with her bare hands. Absolutely not.

She had no idea why she stayed late- after everyone had gone home. She was barely paid anything for this job as it is, she wouldn't be getting any more for staying and cleaning. She wasn't a janitor.

Being a janitor would probably be a lot better at this point , she thought angrily.

The phone suddenly rang, a high pitched noise that made her jump, and she paused, looking through the doorway at the phone sitting on the desk. She walked towards it as it rang for a second time, snatching off her gloves to answer it.

"Hawkins Post?" Her eyes widened, and said, "Um, hold on- I'm sorry, can you repeat that?"

She scrambled for a pen and grabbed the pad of sticky notes from the other side of the desk and began writing what the person on the other end of the line told her.

Doris Driscoll

4819 Cornwallis RD

DISEASE… RATS

Eventually, Mike and El had to leave so she'd be back in time for curfew, promising to see them all the next day. Dustin still hadn't had any luck contacting Suzie, and it was dark out when Max and Lucas decided to leave as well.

"I'm sorry, Dustin." Will apologized, standing up. "I don't want to be out too late. Maybe we can play D&D tomorrow?" he suggested.

"Yeah, maybe." Dustin frowned. "Stay safe. See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow."

Dustin stayed for a few more minutes, and sighed, beginning to get up when he heard static on the radio.

"Suzie? Suzie, is that you?"

A weird voice spoke over the radio, in a language he couldn't understand. The volume increased, and Dustin, despite being clueless as to what they were saying, he brought out his tape recorder and turned it on.

In Russian, the voice spoke,

The silver cat feeds… when blue meets yellow in the west… A trip to China sounds nice... If you tread lightly… The week is long… The silver cat feeds... Beautiful, isn't it?

Not too far away, Billy's life was changing forever.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Is someone there? Hello? What do you want? Hey! I said, what do you want? I *said* , what do you want?"

Billy was gone.

"Knock, knock!" Hopper knocked on the door frame before opening the door and going inside, only to find his adopted daughter hunched over her work book, and her boyfriend flipping through index cards. The damn cat was curled up in the corner of the room, on a little cat tree Hopper got for her. "Alright, that's enough." he grabbed the work book right out from under her, holding it behind his back.

"Hey!" she exclaimed.

"Woah, what the hell?" Mike asked, looking up from the index cards.

"Why'd you take it?" El demanded, scooting to the edge of the bed, about to try and get up to take it from him again.

"We've gotta have a talk, us three." he replied.

"What'd we do?" Mike asked, confused.

"Tomorrow is literally July first, and you two have done *nothing* but sit on your asses in here or in the living room, *reading* , and quite frankly, I'm sick of it."

“You’re sending mixed signals here, Hop.” Mike said, glancing at his girlfriend who looked just as confused. “You want us to be out getting into trouble…?”

“No, I want you to go your asses outside and have fun.” he said. “For *one week* . It’s not healthy for you to be cooped up inside, hell, even last year El would go outside and do things with me, but now, all you two do is sit inside and study! I understand you want to get your work done, kid, but you need a break. You’ll get burnt out on school before you even get there.”

“Am I… grounded from doing school?” she asked, tilting her head to the side, the ends of her hair just barely going past her shoulder now.

“No, you’re not grounded at all. In fact, tomorrow, you kids are going out.”

“Out? Outside?” Mike asked. Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose.

“For a kid as smart as you, kid, you sure are pretty dense.”

“Nancy tells me that all the time.” Mike replied easily.

“What I *mean is,* you two and the rest of your group of friends are going out. I literally do *not* care where you go, as long as you are *careful* , *safe* and *cautious* of your whereabouts and who is around you.”

“Wait, El has permission to go out?” Mike asked. El perked up at that.

“Technically, no.” Hopper shook his head. “Owens hasn’t given the okay yet, but considering he thinks you’ll be good to start school next year, I think it would be fine. But it’s just for tomorrow, okay? We’ll start kind of introducing you to the town in a couple weeks.”

“So she could go to the mall?” Mike asked. “And see a movie?” Hopper nodded.

“But like I said, you have to be cautious. The mall is huge, and there’ll be a lot of people there.”

“It’s kind of perfect, honestly.” Mike said. “Who would question a

group of friends walking around the mall?"

"Maybe so, but you still need to be careful." Hopper said.

"Awesome!" El nearly tackled Hopper in a hug, and he laughed, hugging her back and ruffling her hair.

"I'm giving this back to you just for tonight," he handed her the work book, "but tomorrow, I'm taking all of your work books to the station and locking them up in my desk so you can't work on them." she groaned and flicked his mustache.

"How long?" she asked.

"Just a couple days," he told her. "So you can have fun. It's not to punish you."

"I know."

Monday, July 1, 1985

Nancy stared at the notepad with Mrs. Driscoll's name, address and number on it, *Diseased rats* scribbled underneath. The coffee she was pouring spilled out onto the counter.

"Oh, shit, shit." she muttered, slamming the coffee pot down onto the counter.

"Whoopsie-daisy!" Bruce laughed. She raised her eyebrows and gave a forced smile. "Careful there, Nancy Drew. Careful! Pouring coffee's a tough gig, eh?" he and the rest of his buddies in the office cackled. She turned back around and scrubbed at the mess she made.

She knocked on her bosses door, announcing her entrance, "And here you are, two creams, two sugars."

"Thanks, sweetheart."

"Of course."

"Tom?" she asked.

“Hm?”

“I really hate to ask this, but do you think one of the other girls

could run and grab lunch today?”

“They're needed at their desks.” he tilted his head to the side.

“I know, I just, um… I really need to go to the doctor.” she rolled her eyes a little, acting as though even she were uncomfortable with the conversation, much like he would be in just a moment. “I've been having some… uh… Girl problems.” he let out a wheeze.

She marched to the room where Jonathan was located, opening the door with a grin.

“Oh, come on! The light!” he exclaimed.

“Sorry. Let’s go!”

“Look, I just…” he glanced at his girlfriend nervously. “I don't know if this is a good idea anymore.”

“Really?” she looked at him, an eyebrow raised as they made their way to his car. “Because I feel like it's the best idea I've had all summer!”

“Look, all I'm saying is, what harm is there in asking?”

“The harm in asking, is that Tom will say no.” They looked over the roof of the car at each other. “We ask for forgiveness, not permission. And if this story's as good as I think it's gonna be, then Tom won't care. In fact, he'll thank us.” she said, confident.

“Or the old lady is nuts and the story blows up in our face and Tom fires us.”

“And then we never have to work at this shithole again.” she opened the door and got in, slamming it behind her.

Hopper dropped El off at the Wheeler’s around nine that morning,

and it was now nearing ten and Mike was still out cold. But El was okay with waiting, Max had already arrived, and according to her, Lucas would be there around ten thirty and Will was on his way. They watched cartoons with Holly until they heard a loud thump from above, and Rosie came running down the stairs and into the kitchen, Mike following not close behind. Her leash was attached to her collar, but her human was not.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit.” he said after every step down he took. “Please don’t shit in the kitchen, please don’t shit in the kitchen.” he begged the dog, not paying the girls in the living room any attention as he used the rail to swing himself a little faster down the hall, running into the kitchen, picking the leash up and yanking open the door for Rosie to go out.

“Michael! What have I told you about running in the house!” Karen scolded.

“Would you rather her poop in the kitchen?” he asked, closing the door behind him. “Lord have mercy on my soul.” she muttered.

“When did Wheeler get so fast?” Max snorted.

“When Rosie kept pooping on the stairs.” El replied. “And he had to clean it up.”

“He tells you things like that in confidence, does he?” Max asked.

“Yes.”

A couple minutes later, Mike came back in, a jumping Rosie coming in behind him, a squeaky toy in her mouth. He unhooked the leash and hung it around his neck to take back upstairs, and crouched a little to look at her.

“You like the toy?” he asked in a baby voice. Rosie barked, dropping the toy and Mike snatched it up, holding it away from her. She barked again and jumped up, trying

“Michael!” Karen scolded once again. He looked her dead in the eye and squeezed the toy, making it squeak *loudly* . “I’m gonna shove that thing-”

“Jeez, mom!” he laughed. “Sorry, sorry, it was just easy. I won’t do it again.” he threw the toy down the hall and she ran for it. He leaned on the counter, resting on his elbows as he watched his mom chop fruit and toss them into a bowl.

“Did you sleep okay last night?” she asked, glancing at him for a moment.

“Yeah, that bed is ridiculously comfortable.” he chuckled, scratching the top of his bed. “I honestly wanna get back in it, but I have plans.”

“Is that so? I had no idea.” she said, raising an eyebrow. It was obvious in her tone that she was lying, but he didn’t pay enough attention to realize it as he began rambling about what Hopper told him and El last night.

“Yeah, Hopper is like, *grounding* El from doing school work because he thinks we need to go out and do something.”

“Which he’s right. You’re very pale, Sweetie.”

“Okay first, rude.” he narrowed his eyes at her and she grinned, glancing at the two girls who decided to eavesdrop, sneaking into the hallway. They were grinning at her. “Second, it’s not like I would tan if I stayed outside all day anyways.”

“True.” she nodded. He made an affronted noise at her but continued speaking,

“But he gave us permission to take El to the *mall* . The *mall* mom. She’s gonna love it. There’s a Burger King there so maybe everyone will wanna get something from there, I don’t know if she’s ever had it. We’re probably gonna see a movie- I know I can get Steve to sneak us in again. There’s lights and colors literally everywhere, and *God* . I just know she’s gonna love it.” Karen smiled at her son. He was so in love with this young lady, it was adorable.

“Do you think she’ll be getting any new clothes?” she asked, curious. “I’m sure Max would be happy to help her find a few new outfits.”

“I don’t know if he gave her any money.” Mike said. “And I only have like… three dollars and fifty cents so I can’t exactly contribute.” He

could *easily* take some out of Nancy's stash, but he's sure she'd really kill him this time.

"Well, I'll give you a little something to hold you over for today." she told him. "But you should go get ready, Will is on his way over and Lucas will be here at ten thirty." he made a face at her.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Those two." she nodded her head towards the two, who were standing at the doorway of the kitchen now, arms linked together and grinning when he looked back at them, nearly falling over laughing at his reaction.

He let out a weird noise and slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from really getting yelled at by his mom.

"How long have you been here?" he squeaked, standing correctly and turning to face them completely.

"Since well before the *shit* incident." Max replied smugly.

"I've been here since nine." El told him.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" he asked. She shrugged.

"I've been watching cartoons with Holly." she told him.

"Well, next time wake my lazy ass up." he told her. She smiled at him. "I'm gonna go get ready. I'll be back down in ten." he said, leaning down to kiss her cheek as he walked past the two. She turned to watch him walk down the hall and sighed, smiling to herself as she turned back around. Max and Karen were looking at her, grins on their faces.

"What?" she asked.

"You and my son." Karen replied, and left it at that

Max just laughed when El looked at her in confusion.

16. Chapter 16

Summary for the Chapter:

> This chapter is mainly focused on Dustin, Steve and Robin and their quest to figure out the Russian Transmission, along with Nancy and Jonathan investigating the rabid rats in Mrs. Driscoll's basement.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Next chapter, we'll focus on the Party minus Dustin, and what they're up to. There likely won't be much more to the Scoops Troop in the coming chapters, besides when everyone is reunited in the mall, same with Nancy and Jonathan with their quest to figure out the rabid rats.

"Have a nice day." Robin Buckley deadpanned as she held out two ice cream cones to the couple in front of the counter.

"Thank you!" The girl said cheerily, and the couple made their way out of the shop, only for her to be face to face with a teen in a yellow and green hat, smiling as though it were the best day of his life. It was kind of adorable, really, but she hated this job too much to be too enthused about it.

"Hi!"

"Hi." she replied, placing the palms of her hands flat on the counter and staring at him.

"I'm Dustin." he pointed at himself and then at her.

"I'm... Robin." *Guess we're introducing ourselves now* .

"Pleasure to meet you. Uh, is... is he here?"

"Is who here?" she asked, a slight musical lilt to her voice. Suddenly, the door to the back room slammed open and Steve slid out of the

room as if he were in a movie.

“Henderson.” *Dustin* started laughing, and Steve started jumping, doing a little dance. “Henderson! He's back! He's back!” he exclaimed

“I'm back!”

“Hey! Oh!” They started doing a *very* weird hand shake, but she couldn’t help but watch, her eyes drifting back and forth between the older teen and younger teen.

“How many children are you friends with?” she asked, and he wiped a bit of spit from his mouth and gave Dustin a look, nodding and gesturing towards her.

“No, no. No way.” Steve shook his head as Dustin stuffed his mouth with ice cream. “Hotter than Phoebe Cates? Absolutely no way.”

“Mhm! She’s brilliant, too. *And* she doesn’t even care that my real pearls are still coming in! She says kissing is better without teeth.” Steve made a face at the last comment, and had many things he wanted to say, but decided not to.

“Wow. Yeah, that's great. Proud of you, man. That's kinda romantic. Like… That’s just… Wow.” Dustin hummed, smiling to himself. He glanced at Steve as he mixed his ice cream in with what was melting.

“So do you really just get to eat as much of this as you want?”

“Yeah. I mean, pretty much. It's not really a good idea for me, though, because I gotta keep in shape for the ladies.”

“Yeah, and how's that working out for you?” Robin snickered from the front.

“Ignore her.” Steve huffed.

“She seems cool.”

“She's not. So, where are the other shitheads?” Steve asked. “Mike is always in here ringing that damn bell to drive me insane.”

“Well, you and Jonathan want to be his *big brothers* as you call it, so what did you expect?” Steve waved him off. “Either way, they ditched me yesterday.”

“No!” Steve exclaimed, shocked.

“Okay, no, they didn’t really *ditch* me, but it kinda felt like they did.”

“What do you mean?”

“They surprised me with a sign that said welcome home, and El was moving my robots and stuff and it scared the *shit* outta me, Steve, like I almost shat myself.” Steve snorted at the use of *shat* . “Anyways, they surprised me and I accidentally sprayed Lucas in the eyes with the hair spray you gave me, and Max helped him with his eyes and I showed everyone the stuff I made at camp and yadda yadda yadda, we went out to the highest point in Hawkins that I know of and set up Cerebro-”

“What’s Cerebro?”

Dustin completely ignored him, “and we all sat up there while I tried to contact Suzie, and I was feeling shitty about it, and you know, Mike being our gracious and loyal leader that he is, made me feel a lot better about shit but then he had to get El home-” he took a deep breath, the first one in a minute or so, “and then Max and Lucas left to do their own thing, you know. Then Will left because it *was* getting late-”

“So they didn’t really ditch you at all.” Steve deadpanned.

“Shut up. As *soon* as they left, it happened. Like, literally after Will was out of my sight it happened.”

“What happened?”

“I intercepted a secret Russian communication.” Dustin whispered.

“What?”

Uh… I intercepted a secret Russian communication.” he repeated, a little bit louder.

“God, just speak louder, dipshit. I know you can.”

“I intercepted a secret Russian communication!” he exclaimed and the shop went silent for a moment, people stopping to look at the two, before everything went back to normal.

“Shit, shh. Yeah, okay, that's what I thought you said.” Steve rolled his eyes. “What, uh... What does that mean?”

“It means, Steve, we could be heroes. *True* American heroes.”

“Huh.” he made a face.

“Mhm?”

“American heroes.” Steve liked the sound of that.

“Just think, you could have all the ladies you want and more.”

“More?”

“More.”

“I like more.” He really liked the sound of that.

“Mhm.”

“What's the catch?”

“No catch, I just need your help.”

“With what?”

“Translation.”

Robin was really getting to be at her wits end with these customers- mainly, the *children* .

“Mmm.” Erica Sinclair, quite the regular at Scoops Ahoy, hummed in thought.

“Can I try the peppermint stick?”

“Haven't you already tried the peppermint stick?” Robin eyed her suspiciously.

“Yes, and I'd like to try it again.” God, this child had an attitude.

“Steve!” she yelled.

In the back, Dustin sat at their breakroom table, playing the recording off his tape recorder, and Steve paced in front of him, eating a banana.

“So what do you think?” Dustin asked.

“It sounded familiar.” he said, stuffing a piece of the banana into his mouth.

“What did?”

The music- The music right there at the end.” he wiped his mouth and liked his fingers.

“Why are you listening to the music, Steve? Listen to the Russian! We're translating Russian!” he snapped.

“I'm trying to listen to the Russian,” Steve pointed his hand at Dustin, one cheek so full of banana he looked like a chipmunk storing it’s food. “-but there's music-” he was cut off as Robin stomped into the breakroom.

“All right, babysitting time is over. You need to get in there.” she huffed and felt the slightest bit more enraged when she saw her hard work on the white board had been erased. “Hey, my board! That was important data, shitbirds.”

I guarantee you, what we're doing is way more important than your data.” Dustin rolled his eyes.

“Oh, yeah?” she snorted and Steve tossed the mostly eaten banana onto the table, crossing his arms confidently. “And how do you know these Russians are up to no good anyways?”

“How does she know about the Russians?”

“I don't know.”

“You told her about-”

“It wasn't me.”

“Hello, I can hear you. Actually, I can hear everything. You are both *extremely* loud.” she rolled her eyes, swinging the ice cream scoop around in her hand. “You think you have evil Russians plotting against our country, on tape, and you're trying to translate, but haven't figured out a word because you didn't realize Russians use an entirely different alphabet.” she crossed her arms. “Sound about right?” She made a mad grab for the tape recorder and Steve snatched it before she could get her hands on it.

“Whoa! What do you think you're doing?”

“I wanna hear it!”

“Why?” they chorused, Dustin eyeing her suspiciously.

“'Cause maybe I can help.” she shrugged. “I'm fluent in four languages, you know.

“Russian?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Ou-yay are-yay umb-day.”

Steve laughed in shock, eyes widening and Dustin laughed, “Holy shit!”

“That was Pig Latin, dingus.”

Steve picked up the banana on the table only to smack Dustin on the shoulder with it.

“Idiot.” he muttered and Dustin glared at him.

“But I can speak Spanish,” she sat in the empty chair next to Dustin. “French and Italian, *plus* I’ve been in band for twelve years. My ears are tiny geniuses, believe me.” the bell on the front counter dinged relentlessly.

“Uh…”

“Oh come on, it's your turn to sling ice cream, my turn to translate. I don't even want credit. I'm just *bored* .” She held the ice cream scoop out to Steve and after a moment of hard contemplation, he snatched it out of her hand and gave her the tape recorder.

Nancy and Jonathan knocked on the front food of the Driscoll residence, and it was only a moment before a short, plump old lady opened the door.

“Yes?” she asked, looking between the two.

“Mrs. Driscoll?” Nancy questioned, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes?” she asked again

“Hi, um, I'm Nancy. Nancy Wheeler. We spoke briefly on the phone last night? We're from The Hawkins Post.” she gave her a nervous smile, smacking herself in the thigh with the notepad in her hand.

“Oh! Oh, yes!” she exclaimed. “Oh, my goodness. You sure look too young for reporters.”

“We get that a lot.” Jonathan chuckled nervously.

“Follow me.” she motioned for them to follow her inside and they did, shutting the door behind them.

“Oh, it's... it's lovely.” Nancy said, looking around. “Um, do you live here all alone?”

“Yes. Jack, my husband, he passed away, what is it now,” she looked up for a moment, before looking back at Nancy, “ten years ago.

“Oh, um... I'm... I'm so sorry.”

“Oh, don't be. I kinda like the quiet. At least, I did.” she made an almost… *evil* face, and motioned for them to follow her again. “This way,” She led them to a door that went to the basement, and she slowly made her way down the stairs, and they followed. She turned

the light on and said,

“It’s right over here.”

She gestured to quite a few half empty fertilizer sacks. Nancy hesitantly walked over to the bags, kneeling to pick one up, still holding her notepad in one hand.

“You see those little teeth marks, don't ya?” she asked. Jonathan snapped a picture of her holding them, and she resisted the urge to glare at him as she looked his way. She looked back at Mrs. Driscoll for a moment.

“And… these bags, um… you're sure they were full before?” Nancy asked.

“I'm old, honey, not senile.” she replied. “Bought them over at Blackburn's Supplies just last Tuesday. Now you tell me, why would rats want to eat

a poor old woman's fertilizer?” Nancy wrote down most of what she told her, before saying,

“Are you sure they did?” Nancy stood, looking between Mrs. Driscoll and the bags. “Maybe they just gnawed the bag? I mean… eating fertilizer seems…”

“Crazy. Believe me, I know, honey.” she nodded, agreeing with Nancy. “But… Something's not right with these rats.”

“What does that mean, exactly… not right?”

“Rabies, my guess.” she shrugged. Nancy raised an eyebrow. She sort of had a point. She began writing on her notepad again. “That's when I said to myself, "Doris, you gotta call the paper." Because if those diseased rats

are runnin' loose, the people, they oughta know. Wouldn't you agree?” Jonathan nodded and Nancy was about to speak when there was a loud crash from somewhere in the basement. “Oh, yes, I forgot to mention!” She raised a hand up for them to follow her again, and they looked at each other. “Come on over here! I caught one of the

little bastards."

There was a cage, covered in a sheet, on top of a washing machine. The apparent *rat* squealed and rattled the cage.

"We're gonna have to keep doing this until you stop moving, you little shit." Jonathan grumbled, taking picture after picture of the squealing rat that kept running into the sides of the cage, trying to break out.

"Hi, yes, um, this is Nancy Wheeler from The Hawkins Post." Nancy spoke into the upstairs phone. "Yeah, um… I have a bit of a weird question for you. I was wondering if you guys had gotten any recent calls about, um… rabid rats?" She waited a few moments while the person on the other line spoke.

"No, uh, rabid rats. Rats with rabies? No? Okay, um… What about just rats, in general?" she grimaced a little as they spoke. "Uh-huh. Okay. Thank you." she sighed as she put the phone down.

"You're a regular little detective, aren't ya?" Mrs. Driscoll commented as she waddled over with a glass of lemonade. "Lemonade? It's fresh-squeezed." Nancy gave her a small smile.

"Sure, thanks. Um… Do you mind if I make just a few more calls?"

"Not at all. I enjoy the company." Nancy put the cup down and turned to the phone book, flipping the page.

Jonathan was still in the basement trying to get a picture of the rat. He'd turned his back for a few seconds when the room suddenly went quiet, and he turned back to the rat.

"You all right, little dude?" It was still squealing, but lying on its side now, writhing as if in pain. Jonathan furrowed his brows. Before he really had a chance to think about what was happening, Nancy rushed down the stairs,

"Jonathan! I have a lead." she grinned at him.

Uh… Yeah, okay, but, uh… I just think there's something really

wrong with this rat.” he pointed at the cage and then turned towards it again.

“Yeah, no shit. Come on.” she turned and ran back up the stairs.

“No, I…” he started, and gave up, letting out a groan and grabbing his things, following her up the stairs. “Nancy, wait up.”

“Wait, that last part, just one more time.” Robin said, and Dustin replayed it, “Okay, that word. Um… It's pronounced... *dly-nna-ya.*” she said, pacing back and forth.

"Dly-nna-ya..." Dustin repeated.

“Which is spelled…” She and Dustin looked at the Russian Alphabet they’d written on the whiteboard. “D... D, D, D…”

“The... The chair. The chair-looking thingy!” Dustin pointed. Robin wrote it down, and after a moment, slammed open the windows to announce to Steve,

“We've got our first sentence.” she grinned.

“Oh, seriously?”

“Yeah, the week is long.” she told him with an accent. He made a face.

“Yeah, that’s super thrilling.”

“Maybe, but it’s progress.”

Steve turned back to his customers, flashing them a grin.

“Okay, here you go, you got a strawberry and then a vanilla with sprinkles with extra whipped cream.” Steve gave the two young teens their ice cream, then realized it was both Max *and* El, said, “Are you even supposed to be here?”

“Dad grounded me and Mike from doing homework. Called him dense.” El said and Max snorted.

“Wheeler is dense, correct.”

“I don’t know what that means.” she replied, cocking her head to the side.

“Ask him, he’ll explain it to you.” Steve told her. “Speaking of that demon child, where *is* he, if you two are supposed to be out on the town or whatever?”

“He’s fucking around the perfume with Will and Lucas.” Max told him, putting a hand on her hip as she and El stood at the side of the counter, so Steve could get the next customer. She looked back at him. “Lucas just sprayed him in the face with perfume, so we should probably go fix that. Come on El, bye Steve!” she called, dragging El with her.

“Bye Steve!” El repeated, waving her ice cream at him.

“Bye!”

The mall was closed now, and had been for a few hours, but Dustin, Steve and Robin were still there.

"The week is long, the silver cat feeds, when blue meets yellow in the west." they chorused, making faces.

“I mean, it just… it just can't be right.” Steve said, pulling the gate down and kneeling to lock it, turning to look at the two behind him.

“It's right.” she replied, confident.

“Honestly, I think it's great news.” Dustin said as he and Robin walked ahead of Steve.

“How is this great news?” Steve asked, walking to catch up with them. He flung his hand around for emphasis. “I mean, so much for being American heroes. It's total nonsense.”

“It's not nonsense. It's too specific. It's obviously a code.” Dustin rolled his eyes.

“What do you mean, a code?” Steve asked.

“Like a super secret spy code.”

“That's a total stretch.”

“I don't know, is it?” Robin asked, glancing back at him.

“You're buying into this?” Steve asked, eyes widening.

“Listen, just for kicks, let's entertain the possibility that it *is* a secret Russian transmission. What'd you think they were gonna say, *fire the warhead at noon* ?” she said.

“Exactly!” Dustin agreed.

“And my translation is correct. I know that for sure, so… *the silver cat feeds* . Why would anyone talk like that unless they're trying to mask the meaning of their message?” she asked, and Steve rolled his eyes, letting the two be in their own little world.

“Exactly.” he agreed again.

“Why would anyone mask the true meaning of their message unless the message was somehow sensitive?”

“Exactly.”

“So I guess that confirms your suspicion.”

“Evil Russians.” Dustin grinned at her.

“I can't believe I'm about to agree with this strange child,” she chuckled, and Steve wanted to snap at her for calling him strange, but he knew she didn’t mean it in a bad way. “But, yeah, totally evil Russians.” Dustin let out a weird giggle, grinning at the both of them.

“So how do we crack it?” he asked.

“Well, I guess we translate the rest and hopefully a pattern emerges.”

“A pattern. Right, like maybe "silver cat" is a meeting place?”

“Or a person.”

“Or a weapon.” he gasped, pointing a finger at her suspiciously.

“It's probably gonna take a super genius to crack it, but… Where's Steve?” She looked around and noticed Steve had left the conversation completely, and was now digging in his pocket for change at the children’s horse ride.

“Hey, Steve. What are you doing?” she asked.

“Uh, it's a quarter. I need…” he huffed, frustrated. “Do you have a quarter?”

“Sure you're tall enough for that ride?” she laughed

“Quarter!” he yelled, catching the one she tossed to him.

“You need help getting up, little Stevie?” she grinned evilly and Dustin laughed.

“Shh! Would you two just shut up and listen?” They watched the horse move for a moment, and the grin on Dustin’s face slowly fell as he realized what Steve was pointing out.

“Holy shit. The music. The music!” He fell to his knees and dug in his bag for the tape recorder.

“I don't understand.” Robin said, looking at the two.

“It's the exact same song on the recording.”

“Maybe they have horses like this in Russia.” she suggested.

“ *Indiana Flyer* ? I don't… I don't think so. This code, it... didn't come from Russia.” he looked at them. “It came from here.”

17. Chapter 17

Notes for the Chapter:

> So! This starts off the same morning that Mike and El are "forced" to go out, meaning I just split this chapter and the last into two, but it's all going down at about the same time! We have a bit of the Party exploring the mall, but we mostly end up with Max and El having a little girl time and they explore as well!

"Anyone know where Dustin is?" Lucas asked as the group of friends rode their bikes towards the mall. El rode on the back of Max's, standing up with her hands on her shoulders for support, smiling as she felt the wind blow her hair back. Mike nearly crashed a couple of times looking at her.

"Mike and I both tried to contact him." Will said. "We didn't get a response- and Mike even called his house and his mom said he wasn't there."

"He's probably still trying to contact his *girlfriend* ." Max said, shaking her head.

"Or driving Steve up the wall at work." Mike added.

"True."

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm *starving* ." Lucas said. "I didn't eat breakfast and my mom gave me some cash. You guys wanna get Burger King?"

"You know Mike does." Will snorted.

"Shut up." Mike grumbled. "El's never had it, so she gets to try it."

"Yes." El grinned.

"My mom gave me a twenty earlier." Will said. "She was super distracted- something about the magnets not working on the fridge."

“Holly’s letter’s weren’t working last night she flipped her shit.” Mike said. “Weird, defective magnets I guess. I don’t know what could cause it.”

“Genius Mike Wheeler doesn’t know what could cause magnets to stop working? I’m shocked!” Max exclaimed.

“If El wasn’t riding with you I’d push you off your bike.”

“With those noodle arms?” she asked. Mike glared at her. El bopped her on the top of the head gently.

“Don’t be mean to Bean.” she replied easily and Mike almost choked.

“He just threatened me!” Max whined.

“You were mean.” El said, bopping her again. Max couldn’t help but snort.

“Thanks, El.” Mike smiled at her and she smiled back.

They arrived at the mall, chaining their bikes to the bike rack and wasting absolutely *no* time in running inside, Mike and El’s hand’s tightly clasped together. They reached the food court in no time, El bumping into people as she looked around in awe at all the lights and people, all the colors and different stores. Mike was on a mission to get to Burger King, so she didn’t really have time to take it all in until they were sitting at a table, inhaling their burgers and fries.

“It’s so… pretty.” she said, popping a fry in her mouth, twisting in her seat a couple times as she looked around.

“Like you, El.” Lucas deepened his voice and did a weird thing with his hand.

“Shut up, I don’t even sound like that.” Mike threw a pickle that fell off his burger at him.

“Hey, I don’t want your nasty table pickles. Keep that shit over there.” he threw it back at him, and it landed on his napkin. Mike stuck his tongue out at him.

It continued like that until they were done with their food, bellies satisfied, and Max- despite Mike's best efforts- dragged El off to do some *real* shopping, leaving the boys to their own devices, which, in the long run, probably wasn't a good idea.

Steve turned to the two girls, flashing them a grin.

"Okay, here you go, you got a strawberry and then a vanilla with sprinkles with extra whipped cream." Steve gave them their ice cream, and finally realized it was both Max *and* El, said, "Are you even supposed to be here?"

"Dad grounded me and Mike from doing homework. Called him dense." El said and Max snorted.

"Wheeler is dense, correct." Steve agreed.

"I don't know what that means." she replied, cocking her head to the side.

"Ask him, he'll explain it to you." Steve told her. "Speaking of that demon child, where *is* he, if you two are supposed to be out on the town or whatever?"

"He's fucking around the perfume with Will and Lucas." Max told him, putting a hand on her hip as she and El stood at the side of the counter, so Steve could get the next customer. She looked back at them. "Lucas just sprayed him in the face with perfume, so we should probably go fix that. Come on El, bye Steve!" she called, dragging El with her.

"Bye Steve!" El repeated, waving her ice cream at him.

"Bye!"

"Why in the *hell* would you spray me *in the face* !" Mike exclaimed, digging the heel of his hands into his eyes.

"You shouldn't have opened your eyes!" Lucas argued.

"You don't spray it in someone's face, Lucas." Will smacked him on

the arm and lifted his hands up to Mike's face, forcing one of his eyes open.

"Ow, what the hell, Will?" Mike hissed.

"I was just seeing if it was red!" Will said.

"Well, is it?" Mike grumbled.

"Very. You look high."

"Oh that's fun." Mike huffed.

"Damn, if it hurts that bad go rinse your eyes out in the bathroom sink." Lucas rolled his eyes. "Ask El, I'm sure she'll help you."

"No." Mike replied, squinting at him. "I'm not a big bitch like you that needs his girlfriend to rinse his eyes out for him."

"What about girlfriends and rinsing eyes out?" Max asked, she and El popping up behind them.

"Mike called Lucas a big bitch." Will quipped.

"Why?" El asked.

"Because apparently, I *needed* Max's help to rinse my eyes out when Dustin sprayed me with hairspray." Lucas poked Mike's eye and Mike slapped his hand, looking at him as if he were offended. "He said he doesn't need his girlfriend to do that for him."

"Well, aren't you a big boy, Wheeler?" Max cooed. Mike scowled at her, but his look immediately softened when El walked up to him and looked at his eyes.

"Do you need help?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine." he chuckled. "It stings a little but it's not that bad." She nodded, and offered her ice cream to him. "No, I'm good. Thank you though." she nodded again and leaned into him as she ate her ice cream.

“Whipped.” Lucas coughed.

“Literally shut the hell up.” Mike grumbled. He then noticed El’s new outfit, he had no idea what you would call it, but it was colorful and it looked awesome on her. “I like your new style.” he told her, grinning. She blushed.

“Thank you.” she told him. “I have more, I can show them to you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes. Max and I are having a sleepover.”

“At the cabin, don’t worry, Wheeler.” Max smacked him on the back a couple times. “I’m not taking her anywhere around the hell hole I live in.”

“I mean it’s cool, I just… I thought we’d be here longer.”

“We’re not leaving yet, you dummy.” she rolled her eyes. “El still needs to experience a real movie, in a movie theater. Right, El?”

“Right.” she nodded in agreement.

After a day full of colors and lights, and a literal *sad* goodbye from Mike and El, Max and El were hanging out in El’s room, listening to music and looking at magazines. Max was holding El’s hair brush, pretending it was a microphone and singing along to the music, and El bobbed her head a little to the beat. Max paused when she saw a certain face in a magazine, grinning at the look on El’s face.

“Oh, you found Ralph Macchio.” she sat on her knees and looked at the magazine in El’s hands.

“Macchio?” El asked.

“Yeah, he's the Karate Kid. Hai-yah!” She karate chopped the magazine and El laughed. “He’s *so* hot, right?” El shrugged at that. He had a nice face, but she liked Mike’s face more. “I bet he’s an amazing kisser, too. Hey, um… actually, out of *pure* curiosity… Is

Mike a good kisser?”

“I don’t know.” she shrugged again. “I like it. He’s my first boyfriend, I don’t want to kiss anyone else.”

“Not even Ralph Macchio?” Max wiggled her eyebrows and El giggled, shaking her head.

“Not even him.” she replied.

“I wonder what they’re doing right now.” Max said. “Because they’d be oh so lonely without us!” she sighed dramatically, and El grinned. “What?”

Ten minutes later, the girls were laughing their asses off on the floor, having checked in on the boys in the void, only to find them burping, farting, eating junk food and watching movies. Hopper came home once they calmed down, totally expecting to see that Mike smothered his way into the house with more school work, but was glad to see magazines and clothes all over the place.

Once he’d gone back into the living room, leaving them to themselves, Max had a great idea and made up a game.

“It landed on Will, and we know what those idiots are doing. Spin again.” Max told her.

“Against the rules?” El asked, confused.

“We make our own rules.” El grinned and spun again.

“Billy.” they chorused. Max stood up to grab the radio off of El’s dresser.

“Okay, look, I should just warn you, if he's with a girl or doing something gross,” she sat back on the bed and gave El her blindfold, “just get out of there right away, before you're scarred for life.”

“Max…”

“No, I'm just saying, I'm serious. He's really gross.”

“Max!” El laughed.

“Okay, shutting up now.” Max snickered. El tied the blindfold around her head, and the two sat in silence for a bit.

In the void, El heard a car running, and looked to the side, only to see Billy’s car, the headlights nearly blinding her. She walked towards it, noticing the cracked windshield, and leaned down to look inside as she walked by it. The trunk was open, and she heard an odd noise and looked in front of her, and she saw him, kneeling on the ground.

“I found him.”

“What's he doing?” Max asked.

“I don't know.”

Don't be afraid.

“He's… on the floor…”

It'll be over soon.

“Talking to someone.”

Just stay very still.

It sounded like someone crying, their voice muffled.

Suddenly, he stood, and stared directly at El, making eye contact, and she ripped the blindfold off. El’s nose was bleeding, and her eyes were read, a few tears having already slipped out.

“What is it? What happened?”

Tuesday, July 2, 1985

Thunder rolled in the distance as El and Max walked down the side of the road, headed towards Max’s house.

“It’s gonna start pouring soon. We should be at the mall or watching

a movie or *something* .” Max huffed. El looked at her.

“You don’t believe me?” she asked.

I believe you saw some super weird stuff, totally, but you said Mike has sensed you in there before, right?”

“Yes,” El nodded.

“So maybe it was just like that. Maybe Billy just… sensed you somehow.”

“But the screams…”

“Yeah, I know,” Max couldn’t help but roll her eyes at the thought. “But here's the thing. When Billy is alone with a girl, they make, like, really crazy noises.”

“They scream?” El made a face.

“Yeah, but, like... happy screams.”

“Happy screams? What is happy screams?”

“It's like…” Max sighed. “I'm just gonna lend you my mom's Cosmo.” she offered. El nodded. She had no idea what that was.

“His car's not here.” Max said as they stopped in front of the house. “You really want to do this?” she asked. El nodded, and they headed inside. No one was home, which wasn’t unusual these days. Max led her down the hallway, and opened Billy’s bedroom door. The door squeaked. “Why do I get the feeling we're gonna find all kinds of wrong in here?” she opened the drawer on his bedside table, and immediately groaned. “Ugh! Gag me with a spoon.”

They continued on into the bathroom, and El looked into the bathtub, which was full of water with plastic bags floating inside, the word *ice* written on them.

“Max?” Max walked up beside her and leaned down to pick up one of the bags.

“Ice. It's just ice. Probably for his muscles or something. He works out like a maniac.” El looked at her for a moment, then something caught her eye on the cabinets under the sink. Blood. She opened both doors of the sink and brought out a green container, looking inside.

“El, what is it?” Max asked, and El reached inside, bringing out a red bag with a white cross and the word *GUARD* on it. Max’s eyes widened, and then, El pulled out a bloody, yellow whistle.

“Do you guys hear that? It sounds like… Thunder. But wait! That’s not thunder, it’s….” Will continued on with his story, and Mike and Lucas were definitely enjoying it, but Dustin wasn’t there, and neither were Max and El, and they just weren’t feeling it.

“What should I do?” Mike asked Lucas.

“Uh, attack?”

“Okay, um, I attack with my flare.” Mike said.

“Woosh! You missed!”

Mike rolled his eyes as Will continued, rolling his dice. This went on for a few minutes, until the phone rang, and it ended up just being telemarketers, rather than Max and El calling to see if they wanted to hang out. Mike and Lucas acted out a *win* and Will was *fed up* with it.

“Fine! You two win.” he turned the music off.

“Will, I was just messing around.” Mike walked towards him and Will glared. “Let’s finish for real. How much longer is the campaign-”

“Just forget it, Mike.”

“No! We wanna keep playing, right?” Mike looked at Lucas.

“Yeah! We want to keep playing.”

“We can-”

“I said forget it, Mike! I’m going home.”

“Come on, Will!” Lucas exclaimed and Will pushed him out of the way and stormed up the stairs. Mike huffed and followed him.

It was pouring out as Will walked out of the garage door.

“Come on, Will. I’m sorry. You can’t leave, it’s raining.” Will ignored him and continued digging inside his bag. “It’s a cool campaign, Will, really! We’re just… not in the mood right now.”

“Yeah, Mike. You’re never in the mood anymore. You’re ruining our party.”

“That’s not true!” Mike was hurt by the words.

“Really? Where’s Dustin right now?”

“It’s not like we haven’t tried to contact him!”

“You don’t seem to care all that much, and honestly, neither does he. And I really don’t blame him. All you and Lucas do is make googly eyes at Max and El and- and it’s ridiculous! All you two do is *swap spit* with dumb girls!”

“Hey! They’re not *dumb* Will! It’s not my fault you don’t like girls!” Will stared at him, as if daring him to continue. Mike sighed. “Look, I’m not trying to be a dick. Okay? But we’re not kids anymore, Will. What did you think? That we’d never get girlfriends? That we’re just gonna sit in my basement all day for the rest of our lives?”

“Yeah,” Will scoffed. “Yeah, I guess I did.” he climbed on his bike and rode off, not caring about how cold the water was, ignoring Mike’s calls for him to come back.

“Will, come on!”

Lucas stayed in the basement, probably asleep again, so Mike immediately went to his mom’s room, where she was reading, Rosie lying at her feet, sleeping peacefully.

“What was all that noise I heard down there?” she asked. Mike let out a deep breath through his nose and fell on the bed next to her, burying his face in a pillow.

“I’m an asshole.” he said, voice muffled.

“What happened?” She placed a bookmark in the book and put it on the bedside table, rolling onto her side to look at him.

“Will wrote a campaign, and we’ve been playing since we woke up this morning.” Mike explained. “And I just… I haven’t been *feeling* it, you know? I still love the game and all but… the Party has just been divided, I guess. Dustin was away at camp, and now we can’t find him, and Max and El are off doing who knows what.” he groaned into the pillow.

“So how does that make you an asshole?”

“A telemarketer called and I guess Will could tell how… relieved, I was to answer the phone instead of play. But I wasn’t trying to be an asshole, and me and Lucas kind of made up our own ending, and it made him mad. He started to leave and I followed him to try and make him stay, and we kind of got into an argument.” Karen nodded, listening to her son ramble. “He said all that me and Lucas do is make googly eyes at El and Max and *then* he called them dumb. That pissed me off but I tried not to yell at him, and said that it wasn’t my fault he didn’t like girls yet and that we aren’t kids anymore. We’re not gonna sit in the basement all day and play games for the rest of our lives.” Karen frowned, because it was getting to that point that it *was* true, and she didn’t like it, but she couldn’t do anything to stop it. They were growing up.

“Maybe he’s feeling left out? He’s been through a lot.”

“I know he has, mom. And if he’s left out he just has to speak up! I’ve tried not to make him feel that way. I don’t know.” he rolled over onto his back. “And he said that I was ruining the party. *Me* . And that really hurt, because that’s the exact opposite of what I’ve been trying to do.”

Karen knew that. She saw how he tried to include everyone when they were together. She also remembered that night he finally talked to everyone, how he *begged* them not to leave him. She truly didn’t know what to do.

“That’s… a lot. I don’t think you’ve ruined anything, baby. You’re trying your best.”

“That’s not good enough. Never has been, I guess.” he shrugged.

“No, we’re not gonna go there. We’re done with that talk.” she said, voice stern. He looked at her. “You are doing your best, and no less. You’re an amazing friend, Mike. Never forget that. Did he leave?” she asked.

“Yeah. It’s raining.” he said, voice flat.

“Lord.” she sighed. “Joyce is gonna have a cow. You and Lucas get your rain coats on and go after him. Don’t give up so easily, Mike. It’ll all be okay.”

Max and El ended up going to the pool, only to find that neither Heather or Billy showed up for their shift today. El saw a bulletin board with pictures on it, and walked over to it, eyes zeroing in on Heather’s picture.

“Heather. Do you think you could find her?” Max asked. El looked back at the two employees in the office, the girl laughing at something the guy had said. She turned back, and ripped the photo off the board.

And that’s how El found herself, sitting on the floor of the showers, each shower running, the door locked, and a pair of goggles covered in duct tape, Heather’s picture in front of her. Max sat on a bench behind her, and watched her quietly.

In the void, the first thing El saw was a mailbox with *fourteen thirty-eight* hanging underneath it. She walked closer and placed a hand on top, and to her left, a red door shimmered into existence.

“What do you see?” Max asked.

“A door. A red door.”

She opened it, and on the other side was a white bathtub. She walked closer, it was full of ice.

Suddenly, Heather burst out of the water, gasping for breath.

Help me. Help me!

She was yanked under again, and with it, the bathtub disappeared, and El fell to her knees, and she could see Heather being pulled further and further under the water. El held out her hands, but it was of no use. There was no way to save her. She ripped the goggles off, chest heaving.

“What happened? El!” El looked at Max, pure fear in her eyes.

Mike and Lucas were absolutely soaking wet when they reached the Byers house, and Mike immediately started banging on the door, calling for Will.

But Will wasn’t in the house, he was sitting in Castle Byers, flipping through a comic book, but it wasn’t interesting to him in the slightest. He sighed and threw it down, looking around until his eyes landed on a Dungeons and Dragons book. He could hear Mike’s voice now.

Something is coming. Something hungry for blood.

What is it?

What if it’s the Demogorgon?

Oh Jesus, we’re screwed if it’s the Demogorgon!

It’s not the Demogorgon!

He turned to look at a drawing hanging up, of himself in costume.

Will your action!

Fireball!

His eyes went down to the pictures, one of them at the science fair, the other at Halloween last year. He picked the latter up

Who ya gonna call?

Ghostbusters!

“It’s stupid. It’s *so* stupid.” he hated the fact that he was crying, but he *needed* it. He was so *angry* . He ripped the picture up and threw it, then ripped the drawing and anything else hanging up down. Then, he picked up a baseball bat, and with purpose, stomped out of Castle Byers.

He screamed and cried as he swung at the wood, until the Castle Byers sign fell off, and he threw the bat down, pulling at the wood until it fell down. Then he *finally* fell to the ground, and cried.

After a few minutes, the skin on the back of his neck tingled, and he brought his hand up to touch it. He stood up, breathing hard, and then he heard his friends calling his name, and they ran up behind him.

“Will? Are you okay?” Mike asked, voice loud over the storm. Will turned around slowly, and stared Mike in the eye.

“He’s back.”

“Is this it?” Max asked, unable to keep the slightly annoyed tone out of her voice. Thankfully, EL didn’t notice, too focused on the house in front of them. Forgive Max for not wanting to be out in the pouring rain, and would rather be inside in her comfortable bed, sleeping or reading comics.

Without a second thought, El unlocked the door and opened it, wiping the blood from under her nose, and they stepped in. Max stopped in front of a framed photo, a mom, dad and daughter.

“This is her house.” Max muttered.

“What?” El whispered.

“Heather's house.” Max said.

There was loud music in another room, and a woman laughed loudly,

and they both turned their heads in the direction of the sound.

“Isn't that cute, huh?” a man said, voice quiet.

“He's so funny.” the lady laughed.

The three sitting at the table- Heather’s parents, and *Billy* stopped their conversation the moment Max and El stepped into view.

“Max?” Billy said, an odd, *happy* look on his face. Max blinked

“We didn't mean to... barge in.” Max said, looking back and forth between the three seated at the table. “We tried to knock, but… maybe you didn't hear us over the storm.” she pointed at the window.

“I'm sorry, who is this dripping all over my living room right now?” Heather’s dad said, looking at them with almost… *disgust* .

“I'm sorry.” Billy let out a loud laugh, and gestured to each person he referred to as he said, “Janet, Tom, this… is my sister, Maxine.” he tossed his napkin on the table and stood, as Janet let out a happy,

“Oh!”

“What on earth are you doing here? Is something wrong?” he asked, oddly cheerful. That was definitely weird.

“We just wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

“Okay? Why wouldn't it be okay?”

“Where is she?” El cut right to the chase, staring him down.

“I'm sorry. Where is who?”

“Well, they're a little burnt, I'm sorry…” Heather walked in carrying a tray of cookies, stopping quickly when she noticed the two girls standing in front of Billy.

“Heather! This is my sister, Maxine.” he turned to El, staring right back into her eyes. “And, I'm sorry, I did not quite catch your name.”

“El.” she said flatly.

“El. Now, what is it you were saying, El? You were looking for somebody?”

“I... I saw… I saw you…” El started, but Max interrupted.

“Your manager. At the pool. He said you guys didn't come in to work today, so we got worried.” she offered, hoping that would be a good excuse.

“Heather wasn't feeling so hot today, so we thought we'd take the day off to nurse her back to health.” he looked over at her, crossing his hands in front of his body. “But you're feeling just fine right now, aren't you, Heather?”

“I'm feeling so much better. Do you girls want a cookie? They're fresh out of the oven.”

Max and El decided to go back to Max’s for the night, so that Max could show her some of her things, considering Billy more than likely wouldn’t be going home tonight, and Neil and Max’s mom were nowhere to be found.

“Which one?” Max asked, holding up two comic books as El walked back into her bedroom from brushing her teeth.

“I don't know.” she said as she made herself comfortable next to Max.

“Hey, there's nothing to worry about anymore, okay?”

“It doesn't make sense.”

“What doesn't make sense?”

“Heather. The blood. The ice.”

“Heather had a fever, so she took a cold bath, but she's better now. That has to be it.” Max said, shrugging. “ I don't know where that blood came from, but… we saw her. We both saw her. She's totally fine.” Max waved her off.

“What about Billy?” El continued, brows furrowed.

“What about him?”

“He seemed wrong.”

“Wrong is kind of like his default.” Max scoffed. “But it's nice to know he's not a murderer, because that would've totally sucked.” Max grinned, chuckling, and El smiled back, letting it go for now, and looked at the comic book on the bed in front of them.

“Who... is that?” she asked.

“See, this is why you can't just hang out with Mike all the time.” Max snorted, and continued on to explain who the woman in the comic was.. “This is Wonder Woman. AKA Princess Diana. She's from Paradise Island, which is, like, this hidden island where there are only women Amazon warriors.”

Wednesday, July 3, 1985

Max and El were rudely awakened by Max’s supercom going off, Lucas’ voice repeating the same thing over and over.

“Do you copy? This is a code red. I repeat, this is a code red. Max. Do you copy? This is a code red.” she picked it up, hair all in her face, and said,

“Shut… up.” she slammed the antenna down and turned it off, tossing it down and turning over in the bed.

Then the phone rang.

“You've got to be kidding me.” she hissed, throwing the covers off and storming over to the phone.

“I'm sleeping. Go away.” she started to slam the phone back down until she heard Mike’s voice.

“This is Mike. Do not hang up. Something happened, something bad. Our very lives can be at stake.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just come over to my house. We'll explain everything.”

“What?” she asked.

“Hurry.” he hung up.

“What did he say?” El asked. Max looked at her for a moment and sighed.

“It’s too early for this shit.”

At the Wheeler’s, they were trying to get in contact with Dustin.

“Try Dustin again.” Mike said.

“He's not answering.” Lucas said.

“So, try him again.” Mike demanded.

“Dustin, do you copy? I repeat, this is a code red.”

They’d barely had time to greet each other before Will was explaining what happened, and Mike made a mental note to compliment El on her outfit for the day when they had a moment to themselves. If they did.

“I didn't think it was anything at first. I mean, I think I just didn't want to believe it. The first time I felt it was at Day of the Dead.” Will shivered just thinking about it.

“Power went out that night, too.” Mike said.

“And then I felt it again at the field near the Nelson farm the next day. Then again yesterday outside Castle Byers.”

“What does it feel like?” Max asked.

“It's almost like… You know when you drop on a roller coaster?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah.”

“No.” El’s response didn’t phase him, and he continued.

“It's like… everything inside your body is just sinking all at once, but… this is worse. Your body… it goes cold and... and you can't breathe. I've felt it before, whenever he was close.”

“Whenever who was close?”

“The Mind Flayer.”

El immediately panicked.

“I closed the gate.” she said, eyes wide.

“I know, but… what if he never left? What if we locked him out here with us?”

“This is him. All of him.” he took a black crayon and drew a quick model of what he’d seen on the fiend that day as he explained. “But, that day on the field, a part of him attached itself to me.” he swiped a hand over the drawing, leaving a dark residue on his hand. “My mom got it out of me… And El closed the gate.” he flipped the paper over. “But the part that was still in me, what if it's still in our world?” He slapped his hand down on the paper, leaving a handprint. “In Hawkins.”

“I don't understand.” Max said, shaking her head. “The Demodogs died when El closed the gate. If the brain dies, the body dies.”

“We can't take any chances. We need to assume the worst. The Mind Flayer's back.” Mike said, looking around at them. He very much wanted to shrink in on himself at the words. He never thought he’d be hearing them again.

“Yeah. And if he is, he'd want to attach himself to someone again. A new me.”

“A new host.” Lucas said. Everyone looked at El.

“How can you tell if someone is a host?” she asked.

“I don’t know, he looks pretty normal to me.” Max said. The group were hidden behind a car, and she was looking through a pair of binoculars at her stepbrother. Only he didn’t look *normal* . Billy was seated in the lifeguard tower, under an umbrella, wearing a hat and sunglasses, wearing a long sleeved shirt and a towel over his legs. Mike looked at her weird.

“Normal?” Lucas asked. “How many times have we seen him with his shirt *on* ?” she looked at him.

“I mean… it *is* a little weird.”

“More than a little.” Mike rolled his eyes, looking down at her. “He was in a tub with ice. The Mind Flayer likes it cold.” he looked over at his girlfriend, whose eyes were trained on the odd lifeguard. “Plus everything El saw.”

“But he's lounging at the pool, which is, like, the least Mind Flayer thing ever.”

“Not exactly.” Everyone looked at him. “The Mind Flayer likes to hide. He only used me when he needed me. It's like... like you're dormant. And then, when he needs you, you're activated.”

“Okay, so we just… wait until he gets activated.” Max suggested.

“No.” Mike shook his head. “What if he hurts someone?”

“Or kills someone.” Will added.

“We can't take that chance. We need to find out if he's the host.” Mike pushed off the car he was leaning on, and walked away.

“Where are you going?” El asked, only a little offended by the way he walked away from her.

“I have an idea. Boys only.” he motioned for Will and Lucas to follow him.

“Seriously?” Max snapped.

“Just trust me on this one. Honestly.” Mike told her, and they

disappeared a moment later. Max huffed and crossed her arms. El continued watching Billy.

“Okay, so we wait until the pool closes, until everyone leaves, and we somehow get him to come from here and…” Mike explained, leading the two into the men’s showers, through the locker room, the gym, “get him into here,” and to the sauna. He opened the door, only to see five sweaty men sitting inside.

“Hey, shut the door!” one yelled.

“Hey, come on, kid, shut it!” another yelled, and Mike slammed the door shut.

“I think I just threw up in my mouth.” Lucas deadpanned.

“Agreed.” Mike muttered, then looked past the pipe on the wall, and saw the sauna controls. “And look, the controls are right here. It's perfect.”

“Will it get hot enough?” Will asked.

“Two hundred and twenty degrees. We just have to figure out how to get him in here.”

“Then we lock him in…”

“Heat him up…” Lucas continued.

“No matter what happens, we'll know. We'll know for sure.”

The group split up, Lucas and Will going to look for something to lock Billy inside with, and Mike and El went to look for one of the dummies they used to practice CPR. She easily unlocked the door and she pulled Mike inside, closing it behind them for a moment. Mike started towards the dummy, but she stopped him, pulling him in and hugging him.

“I had fun with Max yesterday.” she said, smiling when he hugged her back, resting his chin on the top of her head. “But I missed you.”

“I’m glad you had fun.” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “I don’t mean to hog you and keep you away from everyone else. Anytime you want to hang out with someone else, you can, El. I’m not trying to control you.”

“I know. I l-” she paused for a second, and then continued. “I like spending time with you. A *lot* .”

“Me too.” he smiled. She pulled away and kissed him on the cheek quickly, and went to grab the dummy. It was pretty heavy, and before she could really get a grip on it, Mike was taking it from her. She saw the face he made as he hefted it up and stifled a giggle. “This thing is super creepy.” he grinned, holding it with one arm and putting his hand on it’s chin. “I think it’ll work, right buddy?” he made it seem like he was replying, “Right Mike!” and El let out a loud laugh, shaking her head at him.

“Come on, you dummy.” she told him, and grabbed his wrist, pulling him with her.

It was creepy, being at the pool at night. No one was around, it was completely empty, besides them and Billy, who was in the shower. They had everything set up in no time, and were hiding, waiting for the right moment to begin.

He was at his locker when they made the first noise.

“Pool's closed.” he said, making no move to go anywhere. They made another noise.

“Hey. Do you hear me?” he slammed the locker shut. “Pool is closed!” they heard him banging on the locked door, and Mike took that as his cue to start. The lights turned off.

“Billy!”

“Who's there?”

“Billy!”

“Who's there?”

“Billy! Billy!”

“You think this is funny, huh?”

“Billy. Come and find me!”

“I find you, it is your funeral.”

“Come and get me. Come on!”

“Billy!”

“Got you.” Billy saw the dummy hanging up in the sauna, and grinned, laughing and clapping his hands like a maniac.

“Come and get me, you piece of shit.” Mike said as Billy opened the door. He paused, before storming in and grabbing the dummy by the throat and holding it in the air.

“Hey.” Billy looked at the supercom taped to the dummy's chest. “Behind you.” he threw it down and looked behind him.

“Hi.” El said, and threw him into the wall, slamming the door as Mike and the other’s came in, rushing to lock him in.

Billy beat on the door for a moment, grunting as he tried to open it, before stopping and looking out the window at them.

“Max.” Max stared him down, before looking at El.

“Do it.”

Will ran to the controls, and turned it as far as it would go.

“Max! Let me out of here! Let me out.” his breath fogged up the glass.

“You kids… You think this is funny? You kids think this is some kind of sick prank, huh? You little shits think this is funny?” he spit at the glass. “What is this? Open the door. Open the door!” he put all his weight into the door, and they all jumped, stepping back. “Open the door! Open the goddamn door!” he dropped to the ground and started screaming, and Will looked at the meter.

“We're at two twenty.” he said. He rejoined them, standing beside Mike- behind El.

Billy started crying, and repeating things over and over once Max looked inside the glass. He started begging and pleading with her to let him out, promising that it wasn’t his fault. That he’d done some really bad things, and that *he* made me do it. This continued for a few minutes, the other’s standing back wearily, until Will felt it.

“He's activated.” Will said, touching the back of his neck. Mike looked at him, then at Max.

“Max, get away from the door.” Mike said.

“What?” she turned to look at him.

“Get away from the door!” he yelled as Billy broke the glass. Max backed away from him quickly as he screamed,

“Let me out, you bitch! Let me out! I'll fucking gut you! Let me out!”

He reached out and grabbed one of the poles holding him inside, and threw it at her. Lucas grabbed his slingshot, and shot a rock directly at Billy, and it knocked him down long enough for Max to run to them. The light’s started flickering. Billy started running at the door, trying to break it down.

“He can't get out, can he?” Max asked.

“No way.” Lucas shook his head. “No way.”

He broke down the door, sliding on his knees in front of them before jumping up, staring El down as she got in her fighting stance, holding her arms out in front of the group to protect them. Lucas put his arm in front of Max, pushing her behind him. El raised her right hand, lifting a barbell up, and throwing a thim, pinning him against the wall by his neck. She threw up her other hand, grunting as she felt her powers flowing out towards him.

She screamed as he fought against her, and he threw it off him, dropping to the floor and immediately grabbing her by the hair.

“No!” she screamed.

He looked at the group as he grabbed her neck, squeezing. Her hands flew up to his, clawing at his hand.

She beat at his arm as he lifted her high in the air, kicking her legs as he stole the air from her. “No! No!” she coughed and cried, but it was no use. She couldn’t get him off her. And then,

“Go to hell, you piece of shit!” Mike hit Billy over the head with an empty bar, and Billy hit the ground. Will, Lucas and Max jumped back in shock. They hadn’t even noticed the boy grab it. Mike went to hit him again, as El hit the floor heaving, catching her breath. Billy caught it and snatched it from him, throwing it.

Mike stepped back, and Billy stepped forward, until Mike was hitting the wall. He just knew he was about to get his ass handed to him, but then, Billy was in the air again, and El was getting off her knees. She looked exhausted, but she wasn’t gonna let Mike get hurt. She held him in the air as she slowly made her way in front of Mike, screaming as she finally threw him, as hard she could. He went flying through the brick wall, and El let out a sob as she fell against Mike, slowly falling to the ground and he caught her, falling with her. They sat that way for a moment, El sitting between his legs, practically hugging his knee because she couldn’t reach anything else, before he got up and helped her up.

By the time the group looked out of the hole in the wall, Billy was long gone.

18. Chapter 18

El could barely hold herself up on Max's bike as they made their way to Mike's house, her boyfriend constantly checking on her and making sure she was okay. Her skin was sticky from the sweat, tears and blood, the blood drying around her lips, and her body felt like a deadweight. The last time she'd felt this way was last year, closing the gate. But she wasn't as strong then as she is now. She still had power left in her if need be, and that's what got her through the ride to Mike's.

That's also the only way they were able to get in the locked basement door.

"I'm gonna get a washcloth." Mike said, ushering everyone inside and closing the door behind him as quietly as he could. "I don't know if mom is still up. I'll be right back, okay?" he told his girlfriend, who nodded as she sunk into the couch. Will followed Mike closely as they went up the stairs, sneaking around corners, expecting Karen to be sitting there, waiting for them. Thankfully, she wasn't. While Mike grabbed a washcloth from the hall bathroom, Will got El a cup of orange juice and was already back down with her when Mike came stumbling back down.

"Mom definitely isn't up, because she always leaves the kitchen light on while she's awake." Mike said, sitting down next to El. He began to dab at the blood around El's mouth and nose, and she let him. He continued rambling, "Rosie's probably upstairs too- some guard dog she is, huh? Didn't even bark while me and Will were upstairs. She's probably getting hair all over my bed. There's probably a pile of shit in the corner too." he was all over the place, easily trying to distract El from everything that's happened while spiraling himself.

"Mike." she said, grabbing his wrist. He immediately shut up and looked at her. "Calm down."

"Sorry," he muttered. Will, Lucas and Max sat on the coffee table, quietly watching the two. Mike finished cleaning the blood away after a few minutes, and El had finished her orange juice.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Lucas asked.

“I personally don’t *want* to.” Max said, crossing her arms.

“We need to call Hopper.” Mike said. “Let him know what’s going on.”

“I’ll go call.” Will said. “My mom too.” Mike nodded and watched Will walk over to the phone before turning back to his girlfriend.

“Do you want me to get you something to change into?” he asked. She shook her head.

“I want to sleep.” she said.

“How can you sleep after-” Lucas started, but Max punched him in the arm and Mike glared at him.

“Billy won’t be back soon.” El said, staring Lucas down. “I hurt him. We have time to figure out… a plan.”

“Besides, if he’s close or is about to do something, Will will know.” MIke added. El nodded in agreement. Will was dialing another number now, seemingly having no answer. El stood up shakily, and made her way over to the blanket fort. She stumbled once, and caught herself, before crouching and crawling inside, not even caring that her feet poked out a bit under the opening. Mike just watched her, not really knowing what to say.

“Are you gonna go after her or what?”’ Max whispered. Mike looked at her for a moment, but then did as she said, crouching a bit and lifting one of the blankets to look at El. She opened her eyes to look at him.

“I’m gonna go check on Rosie.” he told her quietly. “And then come back down with you, okay?” she nodded and gave him a small smile. He stood and looked at his friends. “Uh, you guys know where everything is if you’re staying over.” he said, and went straight up the stairs.

There was still a little bit of food in Rosie’s bowl, so he knew his mom fed her, and her water bowl was still pretty full. He went

upstairs to grab two of his pillows and noticed his mom's door half open. After he grabbed the pillows, he peeked inside and saw Rosie at the foot of the bed, her head resting on the backs of his mom's legs as she slept on her stomach. He smiled a little and quietly made his way back down the hall. Holly was sound asleep, and Nancy wasn't in her room. She was probably with Jonathan or working late again.

He made his way back downstairs and finally into the basement. There was a light on in the corner, just enough for him to walk through without tripping on anyone, and made himself comfortable in the fort with El, and fell into a restless sleep.

Thursday, July 4, 1985

The group were awake bright and early the next morning, thanks to Rosie barking directly in Mike and El's ears and they screamed loud enough for everyone to be wide awake.

"What the *fuck* ?" Max shrieked, only to see Rosie pop her head out from under the blanket fort, her tongue hanging out of her mouth as her tail wagged. Mike was red in the face as he scrambled out of the fort and after his dog as she ran up the stairs to be let out to use the bathroom. The rest of the group sat up as El crawled out of the fort and sat on her knees, watching him go with a sad expression on her face.

"What's wrong?" Max asked, leaning against the coffee table.

"He was crying." she said, turning to them, and it took everything in Max not to let out a gasp when she saw El's neck. "He saw the bruises." she gestured to her neck.

"I… does it hurt?" Will asked.

"Only when I talk." she replied quietly. Mike wasn't gone for very long, and when he came back he held a glass of water in one hand, and two white pills in the other.

"It's… it's just Tylenol, so it probably won't help much but… it's better than nothing." he said, handing them to her and sitting on the

floor in front of her, hunched over quite a bit and watching her as she took the medicine he gave her. She smiled at him gratefully and took it, even though it did hurt to swallow. She tried not to show it, but knew he saw. She put the now empty cup of water to the side and walked on her knees closer to him, pulling him into a hug.

“I’m okay.” she whispered to him. He hugged her back, arms wrapping around her waist and burying his face in her stomach. She looked at their friends, and hated the expressions on their faces. Pity. She shook her head at them, and then pressed a kiss to the top of Mike’s head. “I’m okay.” she said again, patting him on the head. “I’m okay, Bean.” she repeated once more, and got a startled laugh out of him as he sat back to look up at her. She kissed the end of his nose and finally sat next to him normally. Usually, she’d scoot as close to him as possible, but she had a plan.

“I need to find dad.” she said.

He immediately wanted to argue, but she gave him a look and he shut his mouth quickly, sighing in defeat as she took the blind fold out of her pocket and tied it around her head, wasting no time as Max turned the radio on the correct station.

No one said a word for a few minutes, until finally, she said,

“I found him.”

“Where is he?” Max asked

“The woods.” El said.

“The woods?” Lucas asked, making a face.

“He’s with Mrs. Byers.”

“My mom? Why my mom? Where are they?”

“What are they doing?” Max asked.

“Ill...annoy?”

“Mike! Breakfast!” Karen yelled from the top of the stairs. God, why

did she have to be up so early? He knew the food wouldn't even be ready yet.

"Not now, mom!" he yelled back.

"Did you let Rosie out?"

"Yeah!"

She didn't say anything else after that, and El was able to continue focusing.

"They're going to Ill-annoy." El said.

"Illinois? Illinois, like the state? The state of Illinois?" Mike asked. She took the blindfold off and looked at him nervously, repeating it one more time.

"Ill-annoy."

Max went to get El a washcloth to clean the blood from her nose and Mike started pacing the basement.

"Something's not right. Hopper has been on board with the school thing all summer and suddenly he's all like, *go out and do something* and-"

"It's probably because you're getting paler-" Lucas started but Mike flipped him off and continued pacing.

"And now, he's hiking with Mrs. Byer's to Illinois? And for what? Just the hell of it? What the hell happened to his car? And Dustin's MIA, too? I mean, this can't be a coincidence!"

"What does it matter?" Lucas groaned. "The bottom line is, they're not here. It's up to us."

"Up to us to do what exactly?" Mike asked. "El is the only one who can really do any damage and I don't want her killing herself trying to save us."

"Find Billy and stop him." Lucas said anyway, ignoring Mike's

comment. Mike felt his cheeks burn. Lucas and those damn Cocoa Puffs he was constantly eating- straight out of the box with his hands. He didn't understand.

"Okay, yeah, that's a really nice sentiment, but even if El could find him again, and that's a pretty big if, then what?" Mike huffed out.

"We burn the shit out of him and make sure he doesn't escape this time."

"Okay, then what?"

Max, Will and El just watched the two argue, deciding to just let them have it out, even though Max *really* wanted to butt in.

"Then we win." Lucas exclaimed.

"No, see, that's the problem, Lucas. We don't win. We never have, and we never *fucking* will. Something always happens, someone always dies. It's a horrible, vicious cycle that none of us are ever gonna get out of." Mike threw his hands in the air. "We got the Mind Flayer out of Will last year, and now he's back. We don't have to just stop Billy. We have to stop the Mind Flayer."

"How in the hell do we do that?" Lucas asked, throwing his arm out randomly and getting Cocoa Puffs all over the floor. It took every bit of strength in Mike not to snatch the box from him and throw it in the trash, just to spite him.

"That's the point. I don't know."

Suddenly, someone was banging on the door, *loudly* .

"Not now, Mom!" Mike yelled.

"Mike, open the door." Nancy called back, and everyone looked at Mike, and then the door. Mike stormed up the stairs and unlocked the door, opening it.

"Nice of you to finally join us." he drawled, turning on his heel and stomping back down the stairs. Nancy looked at Jonathan, her eyebrows raised.

The two followed him further into the basement, and Nancy didn't hesitate to say something about El's neck.

"Oh my *God* , El, what the hell happened?"

"It was the *same* thing, the *exact* same thing that happened to Will last year." Nancy said. "And, look at this." She picked up a folded piece of paper she took from her hospital trip and showed them, pointing at the temperatures. "Look at the body temperatures."

"He likes it cold." Will said.

"Okay, so this crazy old woman who was eating fertilizer-" Mike started, voice tired.

"Mrs. Driscoll." Nancy corrected him.

"Right, yeah, whatever. Mrs. Driscoll. What time was this… *attack* ?"

"Last night." she replied.

"Yeah, but what *time* last night?" he huffed.

"Uh, around nine."

"You waited that long to call?" Jonathan exclaimed.

"I was waiting on the doctors to run some tests." she replied, looking away from him.

"You weren't there?" Will asked.

"Well I'm here now, aren't I?" he replied sarcastically.

"Hallelujah." she hissed back.

"Ooh." Lucas muttered and Max smacked him.

"You let her deal with that shit by herself?" Mike asked, balling his fists inside his pockets. El linked her arm with his, hugging him in a way, to try to calm him down.

“*I* didn’t call *him* , Mike. Not his fault.” Nancy said, waving him off.

“Um, so, wha... What time was your… sauna test?” Nancy asked.

“Around nine.” they chorused.

“Well, that proves it. That proves my theory.” she exclaimed.

“She's flayed, just like Billy.” Mike said.

“Flayed?” Jonathan asked.

“The Mind Flayer. He flays people. Takes over their mind. Once they do that, they basically become him.” Mike explained.

“If there are two flayed…” Lucas trailed off.

“We have to assume there are more.” Will continued.

“Heather.” El said. Everyone looked at her. She glanced up at Mike. “Billy was doing something to her. She was scared. She was screaming. Bad screams.”

“What's a good scream?” Lucas asked.

“Max said-” Max interrupted her.

“Doesn't matter.” Max said quickly, shaking her head.

“I'm sorry, I'm lost. Who is Heather?” Nancy asked.

“She's a lifeguard at the pool.”

“Heather Holloway?” Nancy asked. El nodded. Nancy and Jonathan looked at each other.

“Tom.” they said together.

The group didn’t even waste time changing clothes as they ran out to Nancy’s car, and Mike couldn’t help but be annoyed that he had to sit in the back, *behind* his girlfriend instead of with her.

“Seriously?” he grumbled.

“Welcome to my world.” Will said as they got in the back.

“Seat belts!” she called while she put her hair up in a clip.

“You are *such* a horrible driver!” Mike yelled as she backed into their bikes.

Everyone in the car jerked forward- or sideways, in Mike and Will’s case- as Nancy slammed on the breaks in the driveway of the Holloway house.

They huddled together at the front door as Nancy rang the doorbell, and when no one answered after a moment or two, El unlocked and opened it with a nod of her head. The inside was a mess.

“Tom?” Nancy called. “Heather?”

“Jesus, it's freezing.” Max muttered as they walked further into the house.

“Do you guys smell that?” Nancy asked as they walked towards the kitchen. Everyone sniffed the air, and followed her into the kitchen. “Oh, *God* . More chemicals.” The refrigerator was knocked on it’s side, all sorts of cleaning products all over the kitchen, mostly empty.

“You think they're guzzling this shit?” Jonathan asked, picking up a bottle.

“Yeah, either that or they just went on a hell of a cleaning spree.”

“But last year, Will didn't eat chemicals, did you?” Max asked.

“No.” he shook his head. “This is something new.” Mike licked his lips and looked around at everyone.

“Mr. Clarke, fifth grade. Posit. What happens when you mix chemicals together?” he asked.

“You create a new substance.” Lucas and Will said together.

“What if they're making something?” Mike suggested.

“In themselves?” Max asked and he looked at her. He shrugged. “I mean, come on, if you drink this shit, it’ll kill you.”

“Yeah, if you’re human.” Lucas added.

Nancy looked at the door behind them, and slowly made her way into the dining room. A dark wine stain on the table cloth. An empty wine bottle and a blood stain littered the carpet in the next room.

“Blood.” Nancy muttered. “Yesterday, Tom had a bandage on his forehead.” She picked up the bottle. It had a blood smear on the bottom of it. “He was attacked.”

They followed what seemed to be a trail- a rug that seemed to have had something drug over it, crumpled up in the hallway. They followed the trail into the garage, where a bundle of rope lay in the middle of it.

“They must have tied them.” Jonathan said. “They must have taken them somewhere.”

“Mrs. Driscoll.” Nancy said suddenly. “She kept saying… *I have to go back* .”

“What if the flaying, it's taking place somewhere else?” she asked, beginning to pace. “There must be a place where all this started, right? A source.” she suggested, looking at them.

“Somewhere he didn't want me to see.” El said.

“If we can find the source, then maybe we can stop him. Or at least stop it from spreading or doing whatever the hell he's doing with those chemicals.”

“How do we find it?” El asked.

“Mrs. Driscoll.” Will said. “If she wants to go back so badly, why don't we let her?”

The sun was starting to set as they reached the hospital, bumping their heads on the ceiling of the car as Nancy sped over a speed bump

going into the parking lot. The receptionist was going on and on to someone on the phone as the group tried to speed walk past her, but she didn't let them.

"Hey, woah, woah, woah, *woah* ! Excuse *me* ? Where do you think you're going?" she demanded, and the group stopped, looking at her sheepishly.

"Oh, um… I was just going to visit my grandma again." Nancy said sweetly. And… And this… this is my family." the receptionist eyed Lucas, a hand on her hip.

"Extended." he offered, barely able to keep the smile off his face. Max looked back at El and grinned at her. El grinned back.

"Look, the tall one with the curly hair I believe." she said, pointing at Mike, who made a face. "Cause you two look just alike, but the rest of you? I don't care who any of you are anyways. You know the rules, Miss. Ma'am. Only two visitors at a time."

"Yeah, but-"

"Two!" she huffed and sat back down, picking up the phone. "Girl, this child has lost her mind. She brought a whole zoo in here."

Nancy and Jonathan continued on, and the younger teens went back to the waiting room, knowing it would be a while before the two came back down.

"Do me and Nancy really look *that* much alike?" Mike asked as they sat in a row of chairs against the wall.

"Yes." the rest of them chorused.

"Only difference is the color of hair." Max said.

"You look like your mom, dude." Lucas said, poking the back of his head, pointedly leaning across Max and El to do so. Mike slapped his hand away. Mike grumbled to himself for a moment, but finally relaxed as he said,

"At least we don't look like that sorry piece of shit." he said.

“Exactly. There’s nothing wrong with looking like your mom and sisters.” Max said. “When we say that it doesn’t mean we say you look like a girl, if that’s what you’re worried about.” she rolled her eyes. He shook his head.

“Trust me, I’d rather look like them than him any day.”

“The only thing you got from him was being a tall mother fucker and his last name.” Will said. Mike snorted at his choice of words.

“Thank God.”

“Your mom is pretty.” El said, squeezing his hand, rubbing her thumb over his wrist. “Nancy is pretty. Holly too.”

“They are.” he agreed quietly.

“You technically just called yourself pretty.” Lucas couldn’t help himself. Max smacked him.

“They were having a *moment* .”

“Oh what do you care about a *moment* ?” he asked.

“Well, it’d be nice to have a few *moments of our own* every once in a while.” she growled back, turning her body away from him so quickly her ponytail smacked him in the face. Will snickered and Lucas glared at him.

Mike and El talked quietly for a few minutes, and Max ended up grabbing a magazine off one of the tables in the corner and flipped through it, showing El something she thought she might like every so often.

Ten minutes later, Lucas stopped pouting over Max not speaking to him, instead deciding to pout about how hungry he was, digging in his pockets for change, even going as far as asking the receptionist if she had any change, whereas she ignored him.

“Old people, I swear,” he grumbled, walking over the vending machine and slamming his head against it a few times.

“Lucas.” El said. “ *Stop* .” she said, and he looked at her for a moment, and as he looked back at the vending machine, it made a loud noise and quite a few snacks fell into the bottom. He looked back at El in shock as she wiped her nose quickly, looking down at what Max was showing her.

“Hey!” Mike called. Lucas looked at him. “Grab me some M&Ms, would ya?”

It wasn’t long after that that everything went to absolute shit, once again. It wasn’t Billy this time, but two of the other flayed- Tom and Bruce from the Hawkins Post, because of *course* it is. They were going after Nancy and Jonathan a few floors above them, and no one had any idea until the lights started flickering, and Will felt it. They wasted no time running up the *stairs* to see what was going on, completely ignoring the receptionist, and by the time the group arrived, it was no longer Tom and Bruce, but a disgusting, bloody, fleshy monster, one unlike they’d ever seen before, and it was inches away from tearing Nancy’s face off.

“NANCY!” Mike screamed for his sister as El pushed all her strength forward, lifting the monster, flinging it side to side, up and down, before throwing it out the window, falling back against the wall, hardly able to hold herself up again. They saw as it practically *melted* into the sewer drain outside the hospital, and Lucas nearly puked right then and there.

Afterwards, they stopped to get everyone a change of clothes and then left to the cabin in hopes to come up with a plan. There, El decided she wanted to look for Billy, and Mike definitely wasn’t happy.

“It can't be good for her to be in there for this long.” he said, pacing in front of her bedroom door.

“Mike, you need to relax.” Max huffed.

“What if she gets brain damage or something?” he exclaimed.

“Oh, shit. Is that, like, a real thing?” Lucas asked, mouth full of

cereal.

“No, it's not. He made it up. Mike doesn't know what he's talking about.”

“Oh, and you do?” Mike asked, glaring at her.

“No, I…” the two continued arguing until Max decided to ask Nancy, Jonathan and Will.

Okay, can you guys settle an argument for us? Who do you think should decide

El's limits? Mike or Eleven?”

“The way that you frame that is such bullshit!”

“It's not bullshit, Mike. This is your whole problem.”

“Why is it that *I* am the one that has a problem?” he asked, crossing his arms. “I’m sorry that I genuinely care for her wellbeing?”

“The fact is, she's not yours.” she completely ignored him. “She's her own person, fully capable of making her own decisions.”

“She's risking her life for no reason!”

“For no reason? Mike, the flayed are out there doing God knows what.” Nancy made a face at him.

“Killing, flaying…” Lucas said.

“Transforming into monsters.” Will added.

“And El's not stupid. She knows her abilities better than any of us.”

“Nobody said she’s stupid-” Mike said, but Max of *course* interrupted him.

“Exactly, thank you.” Max nodded in agreement.

“And she is her own person.”

“Exactly.”

“With her own free will.”

“ *Exactly* . El has saved the world twice, and Mike still doesn't trust her.”

“Oh *fuck you* .” Mike hissed, the malice in his voice shocking every single one of them. Max nearly took a step back from him. “ *Fuck* you Max. This does not have a *damn* thing to do with trust. I trust El with my life- I mean hell, she saved my life on *multiple* occasions. She saved all of us. And you know what? All that *I’m* trying to do is save her. Lucas, do you not remember what happened the first time she saved our asses? At the school?” Mike turned to Lucas, who stared at Mike, mouth dropped open, cereal nearly falling out. “I’m sure Dustin would agree with me. It’s like she faded into fucking *nothing* . Just… she killed the Demogorgon, and disappeared into a million tiny pieces right along with it. I don’t want that to happen again. I don’t know what I would do if I lost her again. I’m not trying to be the bad guy here. I’m really, honest to God not.” he barely let out a breath between sentences, and certainly didn’t give anyone the chance to interrupt him with how fast he was speaking. “I'm just trying to demonstrate how careless Max is with Eleven's powers. In fact, how careless all of you are. You're treating her like some kind of machine when she's not a machine, and I don't want her to die looking for the flayed when they've obviously vanished off the face of the Earth. So can we please just come up with a new plan because I love her and I can't lose her again.”

I love her and I can’t lose her again .

Well, it certainly made sense to Max, now. A lot made sense to her. Love.

Everyone stared at Mike, eyes wide and mouths open in shock. Lucas sat back, a look of almost… satisfaction on his face as he munched on his cereal. A door creaked, and everyone turned to look as El came out, new outfit and all, blood slowly dripping out of her nose.

“What's going on?” she asked, looking at Mike weird, noticing how hard he was breathing.

“Nothing. Nothing.” Mike said immediately, turning away from her.

“Just a family discussion.” Lucas said, smug.

“Oh. I found him.”

“Found... who?”

19. Chapter 19

Notes for the Chapter:

> We have finally reached the end of my version of season 3, and many things are happening in this one! This is one that's definitely changed from the original!
>
> I know it's been pretty rushed, but I am VERY excited for what's to come in this story, and I think those still reading will be too :D

“What's he doing now?? Max asked, as El turned to look at them, breathing hard. She stood and went to the kitchen sink and got herself a glass of water. Eggo, happy and now full of food, rubbed against El’s legs, stopping and falling on her side, swatting at El’s ankle. El crouched down to pet her. She had no clue how long Hopper had been gone, but she knew Eggo probably hadn’t been fed for a few days, and her heart hurt at the thought. She’d probably thought she’d been abandoned. El picked her up and held her close to her chest as she finished her water.

“And that's not normal, right?” Nancy asked. Max looked at her.

“Billy staying in his room on the Fourth of July? No, that's not normal. Not at all.”

“He wants us to find him.” Will said.

“Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of.” Nancy said, arms crossed over her chest. “If we go to Billy, then the rest of the flayed know where we are.”

“ It's a trap,” Mike agreed. “We'll be ambushed.”

“We won't be surprised. We'll know that they're coming,” Lucas said, looking around them and slamming his fist into his open palm, “and we will kick their flayed butts!”

“You mean El will kick their butts.” Max replied.

El put the empty glass on the counter and leaned against it for a moment, letting out a sigh. She looked at the box of Lucky Charms Lucas had been eating out of, and picked it up as memories of what happened to her mother flashed through her mind.

Papa!

No.

Rainbow.

Three to the right, four to the left.

Sunflower. Rainbow.

“It's too risky.” Jonathan said. Eggo crawled up to El’s shoulder and purred directly into El’s ear.

“Yeah, and unnecessary. Killing the flayed won't stop the Mind Flayer. We have to find out where it's spreading from. We have to find the source.”

“Billy knows it. Billy's been there. To the source.” El said as she walked back into the living room, Eggo still perched on her shoulder. El did the hook gesture with her finger at Mike and he smiled at her for a moment, before getting back to the problem at hand.

“Yeah, but-” Mike started.

“It's a trap. I know.” she told him. “We can't go to Billy, but I think there's another way. A way for me to see where he's been.”

El walked over to the TV and turned it back on, and as she settled on the floor, Mike knelt beside her. Eggo hopped around the two for a moment before getting on Hopper’s chair, licking at her paws.

“El, I know you think you have to do this, but you don't.” he said softly. She looked at him. “It's just, you've only done this once before. And your mom, she loved you, and wanted you to know what happened. And Billy's mind is... is sick, diseased. The Mind Flayer is in him.”

“He can't hurt me. Not in there.” The look in her eyes nearly killed him.

“We don't know that.” he said, shaking his head. She turned her body towards him and took his hand.

“Mike.” she whispered. “I need you to trust me.”

“Yeah. I just… I…” he wanted to say it so badly, but instead, “I know. Just... be careful. Please.”

“I will.” she told him. He sat back in Hopper’s chair, and she tied the blindfold around her head.

In the void, Billy sat on his bed, quite a distance away, staring at seemingly nothing. She slowly walked towards him, the closer she got, the more she noticed. The marks all over him, the sweat.

She leaned down and grabbed his hand. His fingers wrapped around hers but he didn’t look at her.

“Billy.” she whispered. “Can you hear me? I want to see. I want to see what happened.” he looked up at her, and after a moment, he grabbed her arm, hard.

In the real world, she started breathing hard, fingers scraping at the carpet underneath her as though she were trying to grip onto something.

“Something's wrong.” Mike said, immediately alert.

“Stop! No! No! No!” she fought him, and finally, he let her go, and suddenly, she was falling. “No!”

She screamed as she saw flashes, of Heather and Tom, of the monster attacking them. Heather in the bathtub. Billy getting attacked.

As she saw his car slam into a tree, she hit the ground, and she heard water splashing, but she was no longer in the void.

She stood, looking around as the waves crashed against her feet, looking around the beach. She heard Mike’s voice, echoing around her.

“El, are you okay? Are you okay?” he repeated, ready to snatch the blindfold off her himself.

“I'm okay.” she said, her breathing calming down.

“What's going on?” he asked.

“I'm... on a beach.” she said softly.

“Okay, I may be dense, but the last I checked, there weren't any beaches in Hawkins.” Lucas said. Max rolled her eyes and asked,

“What else do you see?”

El looked around until she saw a blurry vision of a woman holding a yellow hat, wearing a flowy white dress.

“A woman. She's… pretty. I… I think she's looking at me.”

“Woo! Yeah! You did it!” the woman exclaimed.

Then she saw a young boy running out of the water with a surfboard. He looked… familiar.

“There's… a boy.”

“Did you see that?” he asked, excited.

“Yeah, I saw that!” she exclaimed, kissing him on the forehead.

“That was at least seven feet.”

“I don't know what it was, but it almost gave me a heart attack.” she laughed.

“Ten more minutes?” he asked sweetly. She looked out at the water for a moment, and then turned back to him.

“Yeah, okay, ten more minutes.” she agreed.

“Okay.”

“But any longer than that, Dad's gonna be mad, okay?”

“Okay!”

“Billy?” she called, and El realized. This was a memory. “Watch out for rip currents!”

“I know.”

“It's Billy.” El said.

“It's California. It's a memory.” Max said quietly.

El heard thunder, and immediately looked in the direction of the sound. Dark, swirling clouds off in the distance, lightning flashing every few seconds.

“I think I see it. The source.”

As she walked closer, she saw flashes of memories. Of Neil hitting him, calling him names, threatening him. Hitting Billy’s mom. His mom leaving him with his dad. A memory of meeting Max and her mom for the first time, years ago. Memories of Neil hitting him and screaming at him over the years, and she saw moments where Billy acted exactly like his dad.

She walked closer, through the storm, until she finally stumbled upon a big warehouse, where most of the storm was coming from.

“I found it.”

“Where, El? Where are you?” Max asked.

El turned to look at the sign at what seemed to be the entrance of the building.

“Brimborn… Steelworks.”

Jonathan stood and rushed to the kitchen, grabbing the phone book and flipping through the pages as he looked for the name.

“Here. Okay, uh, steelworks, steelworks… Uh… Here, steel. Uh… Found it. Sixty-five twenty-two Cherry Oak Drive.” he looked at the others.

“That's close.” Nancy said.

“El, El, we found it. Get out of there. Get out.”

Mike’s voice echoed around her once more and she closed her eyes, focusing on coming out of the void. As she came out of it, everything happened in reverse. She saw everything that happened to Billy again, up until the moment she came into the void. She snatched the blindfold off, breathing hard, and looked around.

No one was there.

“Mike?” she asked, heart slamming against her ribcage as she looked around, as though he would just appear. “Mike? Mike?” she stood up, letting out a quiet cry as she sobbed out his name. “Mike! Mike!”

“He can't hear you.” Billy’s voice echoed as he walked out of Hopper’s room. She stepped back, eyes widening.

“You shouldn't have looked for me.” he said. “Because now I see you.” he put a cigarette out in Hopper’s ashtray, the noise loud in the silence. As he stepped closer to her, she stepped back. “Now we can all see you. You… let us in. And now… you are going to have to let us stay.” tears were gathered in his eyes, in Billy’s *eyes. Not the Mind Flayer. This was the Mind Flayer speaking, speaking through him. “Don't you see? All this time, we've been building it. We've been building it… for you.”*

El continued backing away, warm tears rolling down her cheeks as he continued, her heart clenching with each word.

“All that work, all that pain… all of it... for you.” El hit the table, and she clutched the sides, gasping for breath. “And now it's time. Time to end it. And we are going to end you.” she scrambled away from the table, backing up towards the kitchen sink. “And when you are gone, we are going to end your friends.”

“No!” she sobbed.

“And then we are going to end… everyone.” a single tear ran down his face.

“Get away!” she screamed, throwing her hands out, tossing him through

the air.

“No!” she screamed, yanking the blindfold off and turning to where Mike was supposed to be. “Mike!” she cried as he pulled her in his arms once again. She put a hand on his face, as though to make sure he was real as she gasped for breath between sobs, her entire body trembling.

“El, you're okay. It's... It's okay.” he said, hugging her tightly, looking around the room at everyone else. She shook her head. “I got you, you’re okay.”

The group heard fireworks booming and squealing in the distance, but it did nothing to calm their nerves. Eggo was now hiding under a table by the door, terrified of the screams let out, and now the booming fireworks.

“He said he was building something. That it was all for me?” El said, looking around at them. She and Mike were still seated on the floor, limbs tangled together as Mike held her protectively. His heart stuttered every time he heard her hiccup, wiping stray tears away for her every time.

“Is it the flayed?” Max asked.

“It must be.” Nancy scratched the back of her neck.

“So he *is* building an army.” Lucas said, pacing back and forth.

“Yeah, but he’s not building this army to spread-” Mike started, but Will interrupted.

“He’s building it to stop El.”

“I’m sure it *really* pissed him off last year when El closed the gate on him.” Mike said. “He knows that once she’s out of the way, it’s game over.” he shook his head.

“He also… said he was gonna… Gonna kill all of you.” El croaked.

“Ah, yep, that’s nice.” Max muttered and Mike kicked her foot. She

glared at him.

They heard the fireworks once again, but this time… something else.

Nancy walked closer to the window, pausing, before saying, “Do you guys hear that?”

“It’s just the fireworks?” Jonathan said, coming out like a question.

“With Billy- you said it was here?” El nodded.

No one said anything for a moment, and Will slowly brought his hand up to the back of his neck.

“He knows we’re here.”

They all rushed outside, only to see the large, fleshy being stomping its way towards them, knocking down trees easily as it moved. They ran back into the house, immediately barricading every door and window they possibly could. Nancy went out to the small shed and grabbed the gun inside, and Jonathan snatched an axe out of a tree stump before rushing inside.

“Hey! Get away from the windows!” Nancy ordered, and everyone stood in a circle, backs to each other.

Dishes rattled, the light fixture shook.

“It’s close.” Will said quietly.

“Where’s Eggo?” El demanded. There was quite frankly, *nowhere* for her to be hiding now. All the doors were closed, Hopper’s room was blocked off. They hadn’t seen her in the last few minutes.

A coffee mug fell off it’s rack and shattered. The lights started flickering.

“Did someone leave the door open-” she started to ask, but suddenly, a shrieking tendril burst through the wall and everyone scattered, cutting her off quickly. El held her arms out in front of those closest to her, as if to protect them, and Jonathan began swinging the axe, hitting the tendril each time. It knocked him into the wall and he

dropped the axe, and as it was about to attack him, Nancy began shooting it. She ran out of bullets and she was backed into the wall, and as it attacked, just meere inches from her face, it stopped.

It was El. After a moment of pure concentration, she ripped the claws off of it, and shrieking, it retracted the tendril.

Jonathan was still on the ground, and Nancy was against the wall, reloading. Everyone took heaving breaths- and before anyone could react, the roof had opened up and a giant, ugly head was poking it's way inside, groaning and squealing- a sound that would never leave them. It shot a tendril out of its mouth at the closest person, and it was too fast for anyone to react. Jonathan didn't have time to pick up the axe, Nancy was fumbling with the gun, and El was too busy distracted by two tendrils that broke through the walls at her. She heard a familiar scream- though one like she had never heard before, and even with her mind focused on tearing the tendrils apart, she looked to see what was happening.

"MIKE!" their friends were screaming, Will and Max holding onto his arms for dear life as the Mind Flayer used him as a tug of war rope.

"MIKE!" El screamed, and ripped the claws off of the tendrils once more as Jonathan finally got off the ground and joined Max and Will in trying to save Mike. More tendrils shot into the cabin before she could do anything to save her boyfriend, and she heard gunshots, and suddenly the sound of an axe ripping through meat. Mike was screaming and crying, using his other leg to kick at the tendril latched onto him.

El ripped the tendrils apart once again as Lucas- who was hitting the one that had a hold of Mike- finally cut him loose and Mike went flying towards the floor, landing hard between their friends.

El used every ounce of power she had to lift her hands up and split the head in two, causing it to finally real back and shriek, giving them time to assess the situation. She fell to her knees next to Mike, pulling him close to her as his chest heaved, and then someone ripped the end of the claw that was clinging to Mike's leg off, and his scream pierced everyone's hearts, the sound echoing in their ears.

He truly couldn't remember if he screamed. He just knew his eyes rolled into the back of his head as the world around him silenced and turned white, but only for a few seconds, before he was being hauled up and practically dragged out of the destroyed cabin. His head was foggy as they sped down the road- he heard people calling his name and speaking to him but he couldn't tell if he was responding or not.

"I'm so sorry." El cried into his ear, their sobs mixing together as Nancy sped down the road. "I'm so sorry, Mike." he couldn't make himself speak, not like he wanted to. He tried telling her everything was okay, but his words were slurred and broken through his sobs, and *he* could barely even understand what he was trying to say.

He remembered hearing the squealing of the brakes and wheels and thinking about how their mom wasn't going to like the mechanic bill after tonight, and then the sound of glass breaking, and suddenly, Max was directing everyone on what to do and where to go.

"I skateboard, trust me- I know what I'm doing."

"She skateboards." he muttered, his head felt heavy as he let it fall back, harder than he meant to as it made a loud noise when it hit the metal shelf. He could feel someone sitting next to him. "Ow."

"Mike- hey, Mikey, do you know who I am?" Nancy was a blur in front of him.

"He didn't get a head injury-" Max was saying, but was cut off.

"He had to have hit his head in the fall." Nancy said. "He hit the ground hard. Mike," she continued, looking at him. He squinted. "Who am I?"

"Nancy," he said. She pointed at a red blob. "M-Max."

"Good, good-"

"El?" he asked, trying to sit up a little. "Where-?"

"I'm right here." she said softly. She was the one sitting next to him. He sluggishly turned his head towards her, blinking a few times until his vision cleared a little.

“Are you okay?” he asked immediately. She looked absolutely *exhausted* .

“Don’t worry about me.” she told him. Max was doing something down at his feet, and flinched- *hard* - when she put pressure on his leg. He let out a small noise of confusion and hurt as he looked at her.

“We have to stop the bleeding.” Max told him, grimacing as the gauze she held against his leg was already turning a dark shade of red.

“That’s not good,” he said simply.

“It isn’t.” she agreed.

Lucas and Will were taking too long to get whatever they had to get, and Nancy had wandered off a little ways down the aisle they were seated in, so Max and El traded places and Max took off to see where they were. Mike whimpered when El put pressure on his leg.
“I’m sorry.” she told him.

“Not your fault.” he replied.

“Yes it is.” she said. “I opened the gate-”

“El… I’m too… I’ve had *too much blood loss* to… to argue with you about whether or not this is your fault... it’s not.” he shook his head, very much resembling a dog drying off. “I’ve told you… before, that it’s not your fault. You didn’t open the gate by choice. You were scared.”

“It still hurt everyone. It hurt you.”

“Better me than you.” he replied, and before she could get a word in, he said, “El… I’m sorry that I’ve kept you inside all summer. I know you… you want to get school done, but I’ve been pushing you too hard and-”

“I’ve pushed myself too hard. Not you.” she said, shaking her head.

“And I wanted to say I’m sorry, for not trying harder to take you to

do things. I'm so happy that you had fun with Max. You and her should hang out more, and I'll stay out of you guys' hair."

"Mike…"

"And she's right, I guess, about a lot of things, but I promise you, all I was trying to do was protect because I… they say it, it makes you crazy."

"What? What makes you crazy?"

His eyes were a little wild, wide open and flickering back and forth between her and the items on the shelf behind her. "You never… you never heard that term?" she shook her head, raising her eyebrows at him. "Um, you know the saying. Blank makes you crazy? Like… the *word* ." she looked at him, confused. "It's something old people say to each other-"

"Old people?"

"God, what I… I'm… why did I decide *this* moment to say this." he asked, mostly to himself, but definitely loud enough for her to hear.

She knew exactly what he was trying to tell her, and before he could *finally* get the words out, the supercom lying a few feet away from them started making noise. It was Dustin. El scrambled over to it and tried to speak to him, but there was too much static and they couldn't hear each other.

All too soon, everyone was back with the supplies Max had asked for. She removed the gauze from Mike's leg and placed a couple new pads down, standing on her knees and pushing what felt like most of her weight down on it.

" *Fuck* ." Mike ground out, nails scraping against the floor. El explained to everyone else what happened with Dustin while they were gone, and how they couldn't understand anything he said.

"He probably forgot batteries." Will said. "Steve is always yelling at him about batteries."

Mike *swore* he'd never been in so much pain, not in his entire life.

The initial attack was bad as it is, but now, the wound being cleaned with soap and water and then alcohol being poured on it? That shit *burned* and he nearly kicked the shit out of Max. He would have, if Lucas hadn't been helping hold his legs down.

Finally, once his leg was wrapped up and stinging like a bitch, El went into the void to look for Dustin. Everyone watched her, quietly snacking on various items Nancy promised she'd leave money for. But Mike knew his sister. She wasn't gonna leave a dime. El had to snap at them a few times for being loud, but finally, she found Dustin.

Then they were on the way to the mall, the car full of teens, snacks, and fireworks tied on top of the roof. They arrived, sneaking up the stalled escalators in case there were any guards, only to find a bunch of men in black roaming around the food court, one slowly walking up to one of the counters, where from their angle, *four* heads could be seen. The men below held guns. *Big* guns.

"Who the hell?" Lucas whispered, and Max kicked at him. She and Jonathan were currently holding Mike up. He could walk a little, but the strain on his leg was killing him.

The one closing in on the people hiding raised the gun, and with a flick of her head, El made the car alarm go off, distracting them. The men investigated, and she flung the car at them like it was a toy, knocking them all out.

Dustin, Steve, *Erica* and an unknown girl stood from their hiding spot, and the group up top rushed down, El taking over for Max.

Dustin hugged his friends, laughing as he told El,

"You threw that thing like a hot wheel!"

"A hot wheel?" she asked. She heard Lucas exclaiming his sister's name a few feet away.

"It's a toy." Mike told her. She nodded.

"What in the hell happened to you?" Steve asked, gesturing to Mike's leg.

“The Mind Flayer.” Will said.

“That bitch is back?”

“Excuse me? *How* did that car just get thrown across the room?” Robin asked.

“Oh, that was El.” Dustin told her casually.

“Who is El?” Erica asked. El raised her hand awkwardly.

“Who are you?” Nancy asked.

“I’m Robin, I work with Steve.”

And then they all started trying to talk at the same time, Dustin talking about Russians and a secret basement and something about the gate, and everyone was talking over each other. Mike’s leg was *burning* and his head was getting fuzzy, vision going to shit once again.

“Mike?” Dustin asked, noticing Mike’s silence. “Mike, are you okay?” Mike nodded and waved him off, reaching a hand up to act like he was scratching his eye. He slowly took a few steps away, searing pain shooting up his leg with each step. He clenched and unclenched his hands a few times, they felt weak, like they did when he woke up out of a deep sleep. Before he knew it, his leg gave out on him and he hit the ground hard, his shoulder taking most of the fall, and he let out a quiet groan.

“Mike?” Steve noticed the fall first, and upon saying the name, everyone looked at him and rushed over, El kneeling by his head.

“Mike? What is it? What’s wrong?”

His leg continued burning, getting worse and worse until he started trying to reach forward, trying to take the bandages off.

“His nose is bleeding.” Dustin pointed out, voice breaking at the last word.

“Is it your head? Mike?” Nancy tried to get him to focus but he was

writhing on the floor now, kicking his leg out, only making the pain worse.

“My leg.” he moaned. “My leg.”

Then there were gasps and noises of disgust as his infected leg was unwrapped, and then a couple of screams as they saw something moving around inside. Jonathan jumped up and ran off, and everyone was freaking out above him and he couldn’t breathe- he couldn’t breathe- and now someone was moving him into someone else’s lap- El’s. His head was in El’s lap and her hands were in his hair, using her wrist to wipe the blood away and brushing his hair out of his face.

“-gonna get it out, Mike, okay?” Nancy was telling him. “Try to take deep breaths, okay?”

Mike nodded and tried to do what she said but it was *so* hard to focus on breathing when something was crawling around inside your leg, digging into the meat as if trying to go deeper. He was squeezing someone's hands, he had no idea who and he didn’t really care.

Now Jonathan was in his face, shoving a wooden spoon in his mouth and telling him something was going to hurt- and he was right. He was cutting into Mike’s leg and then digging inside it with two fingers in only a few seconds and Mike *knew* he was screaming this time. He used every bit of strength to fight back, trying to get Jonathan off him but he was being held down by multiple people.

“Please!” he sobbed around the wooden spoon. “Please *stop* !”

“Stop!” El yelled. “Jonathan, stop!”
Nancy kind of shoved Jonathan and he ripped his fingers out of the open wound and Mike let out a broken sob.

“I can do it.” El said.

“No!” Mike sobbed.

“We have to get it out, Mike.” Nancy told him, panic clear in her voice.

“It hurts!”

“I know. I know it hurts. El’s gonna make it stop. Right El?”

“I’m gonna make it stop, I promise.” El told him confidently. She took one hand out of his hair and made sure the wooden spoon was in his mouth, and then motioned for everyone to get back.

She focused, and knew that she got a hold of it. Mike knew it too, and could feel it start fighting against her force, and no one knew what kind of noise he made as it started to come out of the wound, wiggling. El started screaming, and Mike was screaming, his voice absolutely wrecked. Glass behind them shattered and finally- *finally* it was out, and she let out one last scream as she threw it. Mike’s scream cut off with a broken, heaving sob as he clung to someone’s arm.

Four new people were standing in front of them now, all of them looking just as messed up and crazed as the rest of them. The claw tried to slither away, but Hopper stomped on it.

“Did that child just… rip a claw out of… that *other* child's leg?” Murray asked, mouth dropped open in shock. The one nobody recognized looked at Murray and spoke, but the only ones who had any idea what *language* it was, were Steve, Robin and Dustin.

“Russian!” Dustin squeaked, stepping behind Steve.

“He’s fine.” Murray said, waving the teen off, and turned to speak to his Russian friend.

“What in the actual fuck is going on here?” Hopper asked, lifting his foot to show the squished piece of flesh underneath it.

“I’m gonna puke.” Mike croaked, letting the spoon fall out of his mouth and everyone scrambled away from him, except for El, Max and Nancy. The Russian was muttering something, stepping back a few feet as well. Max is who he was clinging to, and he was still in El’s lap, Nancy on the other side of him.

“Oh dear.” Joyce rushed over to him as he leaned over and the little bit he’d eaten barely thirty minutes ago came back up, coughing and

burping, gagging every time he burped.

“You guys are ridiculous, good Lord.” Max said, standing up to try and give him some space. “Truly pathetic.”

“We need to clean this up before it gets worse.” Nancy said and Mike heaved again, tears flowing down his face. His stomach hurt now, from dry heaving, his head was killing him and *God* his leg was on *fire*. His face was wet with sweat, tears and blood. And probably a little bit of puke if he was being honest.

“Someone wanna get me up to speed?” Hopper asked, walking closer to them.

“Let’s get Mike away from all this glass and do something for his leg and we’ll talk.” Nancy said, matter of fact, and stood. Hopper walked over to Mike and knelt in front of him.

“Hey kid, is it okay if I pick you up to move you?” he didn’t get a verbal response, he just got a glare and then a nod. He put one arm under his thighs and the other under his back, and the teen could barely keep his head from falling against Hopper’s shoulder. He almost dry heaved again when Hopper turned an almost three sixty, the ceiling above him spinning rapidly.

Everyone was running around trying to find something a little more comfortable for Mike to lie on but all they could find were some lounge chair cushions from one of the stores, but that was good enough.

They placed them on the square bench that surrounded plants, and Hopper carefully put Mike on top. His head was in Joyce’s lap now, and the younger teens were seated at the other tables in the food court, not too far away.

El sat in front of Mike’s head, on the floor, and Nancy watched nervously as Hopper carefully inspected the wounds and cleaned them, wrapping them up tightly even when Mike kicked at him with his other leg.

“It’s okay, Honey.” Joyce cooed at him. “I know it hurts but it’s

gonna help in the long run." he just hummed something back in response, burying his face in her thigh. He was still struggling to breathe a little, his body didn't know how to react to all the things that had happened in the last twenty minutes.

"I don't like the way he's breathing." Hopper muttered. "Hey kid, does it hurt to breathe?" he just got a glare in response and Hopper huffed. "Look, I don't know what I did to piss you off, but I'm trying to help you out here. Does it hurt to breathe?"

"No." Mike wheezed. "Hard to… hard to focus."

"Try to focus on me, okay?" he said, kneeling in front of him, next to his daughter. Mike nodded shakily. "Breathe in… and out. Just like I did, okay? Breathe in… and out." Hopper breathed with him until he finally calmed down a little, and his chest wasn't heaving as badly. "Just keep doing that, okay kid?" Mike nodded again, and closed his eyes to try and focus on breathing, and not the pain in his leg. When he was sure the teen was breathing okay, Hopper stood and went over to the other group, and they all immediately tried to tell him their own stories at the same time, until he barked at them to be quiet and had Steve and Jonathan tell him.

Joyce gently ran her hands through Mike's hair, pushing it out of his face and using a tissue El handed her to clean his face a little. El dabbed at the blood under his nose with another tissue and he let them, unable to do anything else for himself. He couldn't really tell if he'd fallen asleep or just blanked out for a couple minutes, but suddenly someone was pulling him into a sitting position and forcing him to open his eyes.

"What." he croaked, voice rough.

"Do you want some water? Steve and Dustin went and found some cold ones in a cooler." Max was holding a water bottle out to him. He swallowed harshly- his throat hurt like a *bitch* - and nodded. He wasn't handed the bottle, but instead Joyce was, and she opened it, holding it up to his mouth.

"Go slow, okay? I'm sure you're thirsty but if you drink too fast you *will* end up throwing up again." Mike nodded and drank the water as

slowly as he could, not even caring if some of it got past his lips and dribbled a little down his chin.

He drank half the water bottle, earning a,

"You fucking fish." From Max, before he slumped back, lifting his arm pitifully to wipe at the water dripping down his chin and neck. His eyes closed again and he felt someone gently wiping his face with tissue, and didn't have the strength to open his eyes. Murray was currently devising a plan with the rest of the group, but El and Joyce stayed with Mike.

"Mike?" El whispered. He hummed quietly. "Why are you mad at dad?" she asked. He just shook his head.

"Can you open your eyes, Sweetie?" Joyce asked him softly. His brows furrowed and he slowly opened them, focusing on El's face in front of him. "Has Hopper done something?"

"It's nothing." he muttered, clasping his hands together in his lap. He eyed his leg, wrapped up tightly in white gauze, an ace bandage holding it all together, tiny beads of red popping through in a couple of places already. He could tell his leg was swollen, with how the skin around the top of the bandage was poking out. He moved his foot, and his leg immediately stung all over, as if tiny needles were stabbing into his skin, but it wasn't *too* bad.

"How does your leg feel?" Hopper asked, walking over to them, annoyance written all over his face at the arguments going down only a few feet away.

"Tingly." Mike replied, he shifted a little, slowly moving his leg off the bench and planting both feet on the ground.

"I don't know if you should-" Joyce started, but Mike pushed himself up, stumbling a little and wincing when he put a little too much weight on his leg, but he was standing. El scrambled up to help him in case he fell, but Hopper put his hands on the teens shoulders to steady him.

"I think I'm good." he muttered, testing his weight on his leg again. It

hurt like a *bitch* but it was bearable. He took a couple steps past Hopper, slow but steady, and made his way towards his friends. Lucas, Will and Dustin walked towards him and met him in the middle.

“I missed you guys today.” Dustin said.

“We missed you too. It’s been crazy.” Lucas let out a quiet snort.

“I can tell.” Dustin shook his head, glancing at Mike’s leg.

“I’m sorry we left you by yourself.” Mike told him. “I really did have to get El home.”

“I know.” Dustin said.

“And you know how Neil is.” Max added, joining the group.

“Asshole.” Dustin muttered.

El hesitantly walked up to them, her hair hanging in her face, and put an arm around Mike’s back.

“We’re going to be okay.” she said, confident.

As usual, with this group of people, plans were made to be followed, and not a single one went down correctly. Hopper and his team were going pretty well, all things considered, and Scoops Troop were safely headed towards Cerebro. The Griswold Family, however, had a few bumps in the road.

“ *Of course* he had to fuck up the car.” Nancy growled.

“Mom is so gonna kill you.” Mike said. He looked like he was on the verge of passing out- though he’s looked like that for quite a while now. It could happen any minute- and will definitely be at the worst moment.

“Shut up.” she hissed and he immediately snapped his mouth shut.

Will and Lucas tried to get in contact with Dustin while Jonathan and

Nancy argued across the food court, and Mike sat quietly on the bench between Max and El.

Lucas paced around the food court, trying to get in contact with Dustin once again, but no luck in the slightest. Mike didn't speak a word again until after Nancy and Jonathan had the bright idea to take the ignition cable out of the wrecked car on the other side of the food court. As they messed around under the hood of the car for said ignition cable, there was a faint noise of… thundering?

"Is it *storming* ?" Mike asked at first.

"Probably a lot of fireworks going off at once." Max said. Mike shrugged, and leaned his head back, looking up at the glass ceiling and into the night sky. They kept hearing it, and Max noticed as Will turned around, his hand on the back of his neck.

"Uh oh." Mike muttered, vision blurring slightly as the mall shook, and a giant figure climbed on top of the glass. He looked at his sister across the food court as they finally came from under the hood. "Nancy!" he yelled.

And all hell broke loose.

Again .

Lights were flashing, making Mike's headache even worse, and he truly didn't know how he was still awake after all this. His leg throbbed as he was pulled along with El and Max, hiding under a kiosk and then running through the exit of The Gap as everyone else made their way to the car. However, they weren't so lucky when they finally got outside. They didn't know exactly what happened, they just knew that Steve and Robin saved the remaining members of the Griswald Family from Billy and his car, and now Billy was on foot, stalking them, while the Mind Flayer chased after the newly fixed car.

Mike was only slowing them down, his leg *burning* and he kept running into rails of the stairs or random pipes in the walls because of his vision.

“Stop, stop.” he cried, leaning heavily against the wall, somehow having strength in his arms to keep him up.

“Oh my *God* I forgot about your leg.” Max gasped.

“We need to keep going.” El said. “He’ll catch up.”

“I can’t.” Mike said, beginning to slide down the wall, but Max caught him and held him up. “I can’t. I’m slowing you down.”

“I’m not leaving you.” El hissed. “You’re crazy if you think that.”

“You’re crazy if you think that.” Billy whispered, jumping out at them and causing them all to let out loud shrieks. Max immediately began trying to talk to him, but it was no use, and he was too fast this time for El to even try to stop him. He pushed Max into the wall *hard* , and she hit the ground, and then slammed Mike against the pipes, leaving the two teens lying on the floor, unconscious.

“NO!” El screamed as Billy slammed her into the wall, just hard enough to daze her and throw her over his shoulder.

As Billy hovered over her, his hands balled up in her shirt as she tried to push him off, she could see it. She could see him fighting. And all she could think about was the void, the tear that ran down his face, his mother.

Even though the fireworks exploded around them, the Mind Flayer screeched and stomped, she barely felt or heard it. She could hear and feel her heart pounding, the ringing in her ears from all the noise going on around her, she was almost numb to it. He stared down at her, his face angry, but his eyes… his eyes told another story.

“Seven… feet.” she said. “You told her… the wave was seven feet.” Billy’s grip loosened and he stared at her. A tear drifted down the side of her face as she looked him in the eyes. “You ran to her, on the beach. There were seagulls. She wore a hat, with a blue ribbon. A long dress, with a red and blue flower. Yellow sandals… covered in sand.” he stared at her, taking heaving breaths. “She was pretty. She was *really* pretty.” he nodded. “And you… you were *happy*. ” her

voice broke at the end. She softly put her hand on his face, and he closed his eyes.

The fireworks stopped, and instead of her own beating heart, she heard the Mind Flayer's screeches as it turned back towards them. Billy looked back and stood up quickly, readying himself as if he were about to take it on himself.

Max and Mike ran in, the latter being held up by Max, and skidded to a stop as they saw the monster screaming in Billy's face. One of its tendrils came out of its mouth, opening up as it prepared to attack.

"No!" El cried over and over as she scrambled back.

Billy grabbed it, before it could get to her, and he fought it. He fought it like hell. Then another tendril came around, and grabbed his side and he screamed, but still tried to fight. Another one got his other side, and El was too slow. She couldn't stop it from killing him.

El raised her arms and screamed, every ounce of power she had left in her pushing the Mind Flayer back. It knocked down anything that was left standing, the car *crunching* under one of it's giant, spindly legs. Those above scrambled down the escalator, and Lucas barely made it past the monster before it shifted, knocking the escalator completely down as he ran to his girlfriend, who was sobbing over her step-brother's body. She was crying, and speaking, and he couldn't make out anything she said. Steve and Robin skidded to a stop behind them, letting out shocked gasps. Mike leaned against a pillar behind them all, staring at his girlfriend as she screamed, her arms raised high in the air, trying to kill the beast in front of them. He could hear his heart pounding, hardly able to hear his sister talking to him. He was too focused on El.

And just like that, the monster froze, before slowly falling to the ground in a heap, unmoving. It'd grown silent, now, besides everyone's heaving breaths and Max's cries. El turned around, blood pouring out of her nose and ears, and sprinted towards her boyfriend, grabbing him and clutching his wrists, practically shoving Nancy out of the way.

"Are you okay?" she asked, trying to get him to look at her. "Are you

okay?" she repeated. He nodded, swallowing harshly, and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly.

"They closed it." Will said, looking around at everyone. "They really closed it."